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The Battle Begins

It's a new year, and I believe this year in gaming is going to one of the biggest battlefields in the ongoing war for your entertainment dollars. Be it PC, mobile, or console, the service-driven experiences are coming, and they will define the years to come because this generation may be the last generation.

Let me explain: You will still see new consoles and PCs. Technology will continue to evolve, and you will still have the ability to get more powerful hardware. But the hardware you play on will mean less in a service-based world. Our allegiance to specific hardware will transform in the coming years, shifting from physical platforms to which game service you like most. And if you take your gaming to the cloud, you won't need hardware at all (apart from your favorite input device).

Currently, services are connected directly to a piece of hardware or platform, and companies will try to maintain their walled gardens. But ultimately, the company that offers a service that is everywhere (like Netflix or YouTube) is what will emerge victorious – a service that doesn't ask what hardware you play on, but rather what you want to play.

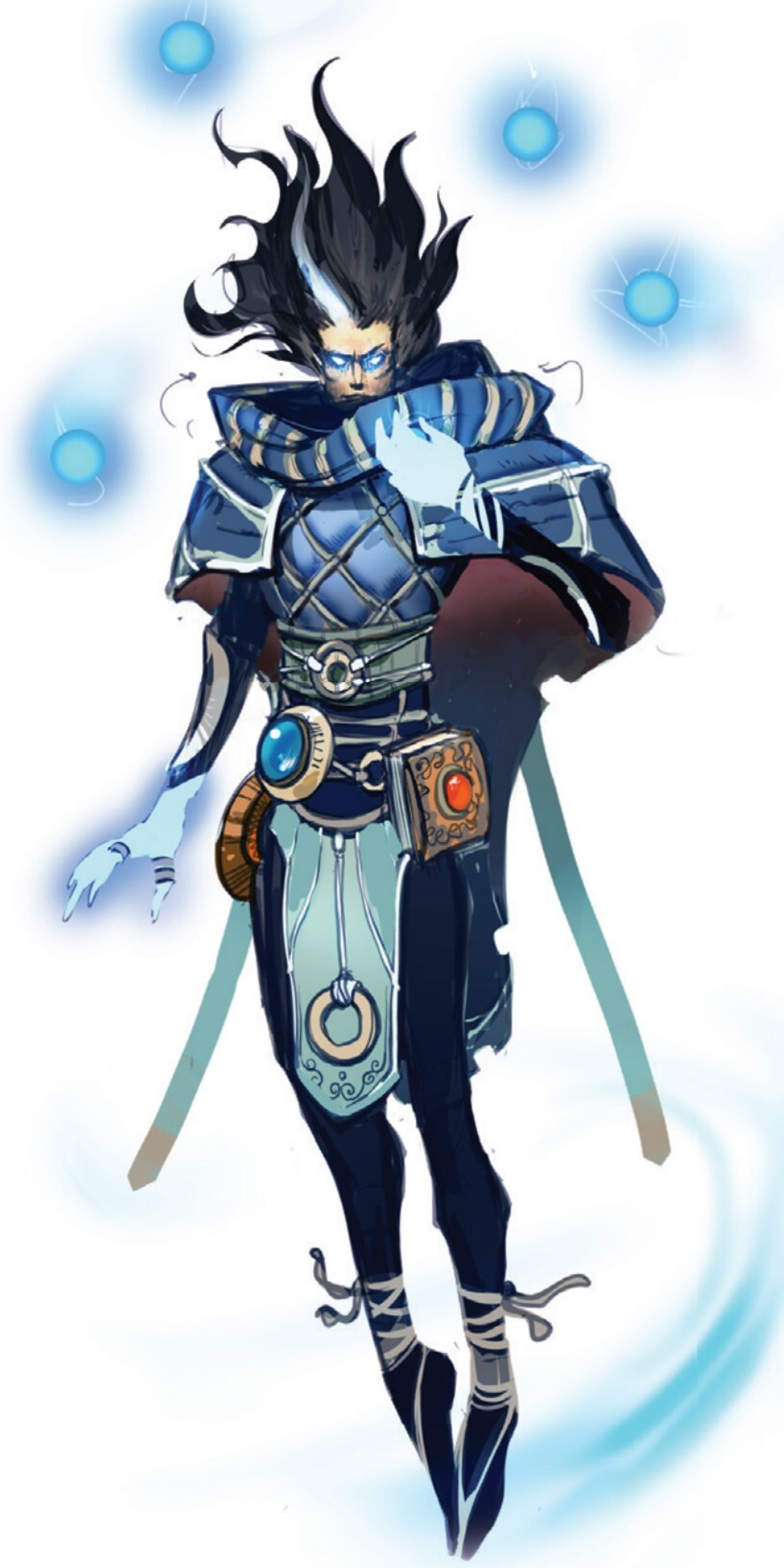
We all knew this was coming; digital and subscription services have changed the landscape for all other forms of entertainment. Frankly, I'm looking forward to it – and this is from a grizzled hardware guy who still spends far more than I should on PC hardware every few years, and has a special place in my entertainment center for all my consoles.

The reality is, I own all these devices to get what I really want, which is games. I believe this barrier will slowly melt away this generation. How many more people could God of War reach if people could access PlayStation services on more devices? Think about the billions of screens in the world that don't have a PlayStation connected to them. This is the kind of change I'm talking about.

I love my consoles and my PC. They've been a part of me my whole life. And I'm not saying they will go away, but in this upcoming generation they will become less important. And I believe that transformation (which is going to take the next five or six years) will be good for gamers and developers. It will create a world where games can reach more people, and it levels the playing field. Microsoft, Sony, Nintendo, Google, and Apple all have a chance to change the way we play in this decade. With stakes this high, it is going to be one hell of a ride.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,



24 Magic: Legends

Cryptic Studios is taking the legendary card game in a new direction with this free-to-play, isometric, action/RPG. We got our hands on the title, with its 12-card decks, character classes, and co-op play, to take on PVP encounters and the adaptive A.I. in missions on Dominaria. This adaptation of the Magic universe looks to be an engrossing and fun take steeped in the franchise's lore. ***by Daniel Tack***

10 Introducing The New Xbox
Microsoft has named its holiday 2020 system and dropped some new details – including a look at a new game from Ninja Theory.

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Check out some of the new games shown off at this annual end-of-the-year bash.

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Don't miss out on these board and card games running the gamut from high-profile licenses like Marvel and Lord of the Rings to our national parks.

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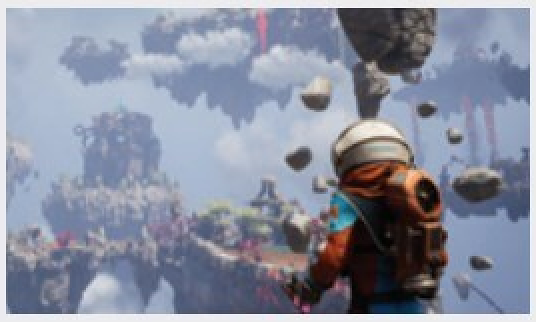
We give you the full rundown of this sequel's new characters, including how they change the experience.



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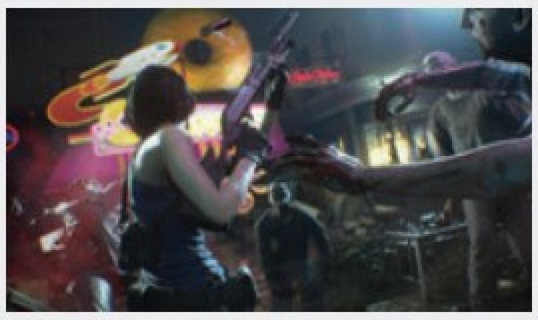

70 **Resident Evil 3**
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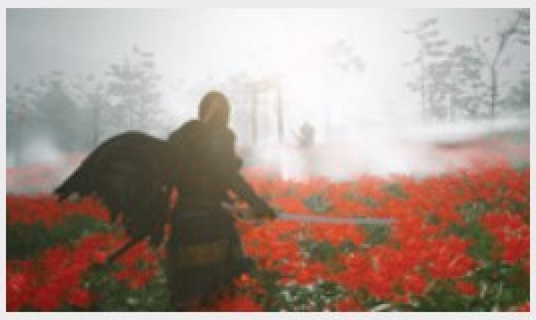
We talk to game director Tim Campbell about the title's new setting, introduction of co-op, and more.



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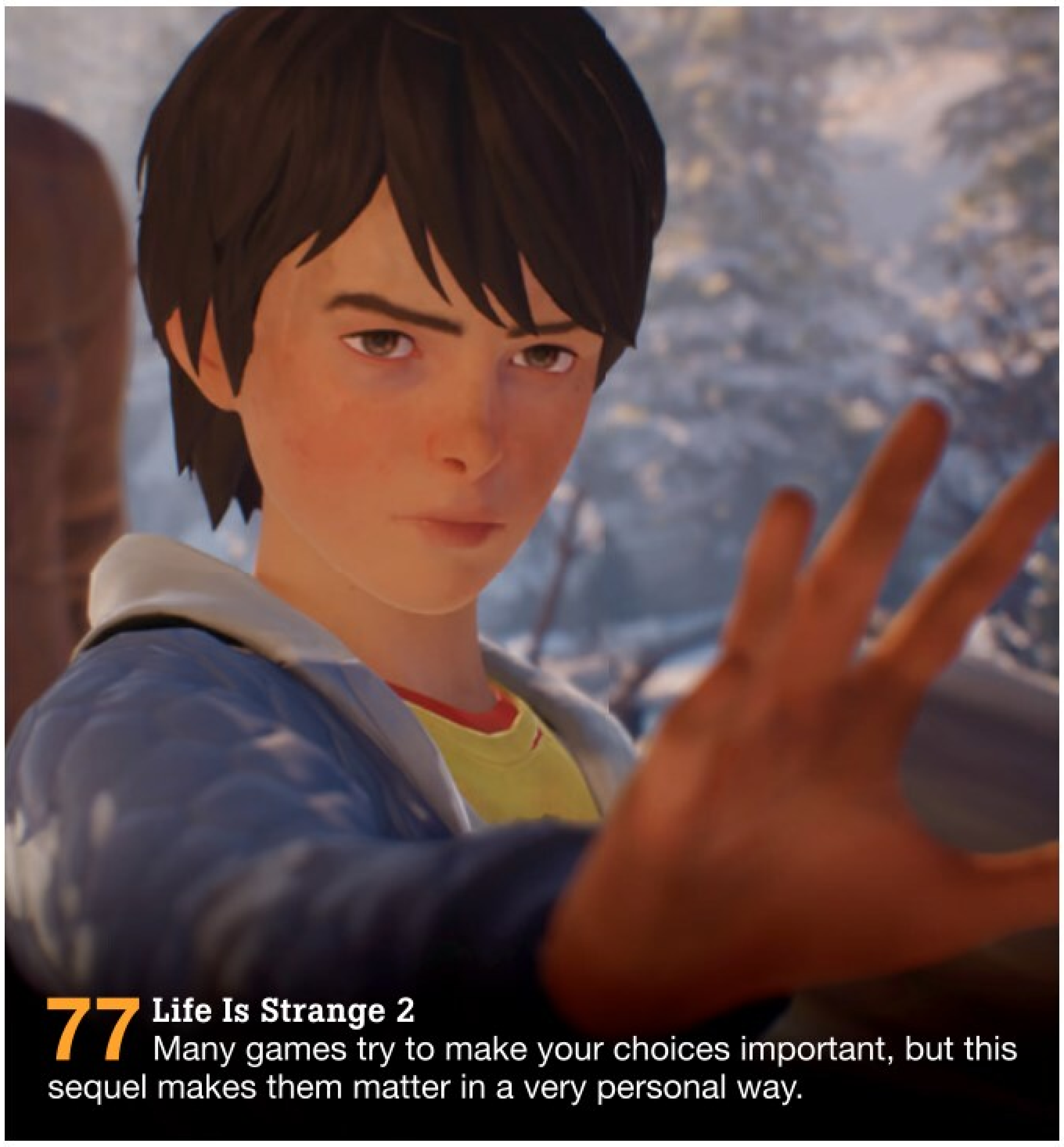
Deadly new footage of Sucker Punch's summer PS4 title shows why they simply call him The Ghost.



77 **Life Is Strange 2**
Many games try to make your choices important, but this sequel makes them matter in a very personal way.

78 **Shenmue III**
It's like Ryo never stopped searching for his father. In both a good and bad way.

79 **Wattam**
Another charming title from the creator of Katamari Damacy.

80 **Arise: A Simple Story**
Explore the important memories of a man on his journey to the afterlife.

81 **Mosaic**
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SO **SMOOTH** IT WILL MAKE YOU FORGET ABOUT YOUR AWKWARD YEARS.

ALL 27 OF THEM.

SNICKERS
creamy
PEANUT BUTTER
SQUARES

SNICKERS
creamy
ALMOND BUTTER
SQUARES

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This month, our readers fill us in on the most surprising games of the year, their thoughts on PlayStation, and Fallout 76's surprising subscription model...

The Making Of PlayStation

I told myself I would just page through your new issue to see what games were coming, but instead found myself sitting for two hours to read through the excellent historical dive into PlayStation. How did you round up all of the original creators to tell this story? It was amazing! Thank you. Thank you! THANK YOU!

Warren Price
Phoenix, AZ

I just read your huge "The First 25 Years of PlayStation piece," and my mouth is on the floor. What if Nintendo released the SNES CD-ROM made by Sony? Think about that for a second. That would mean we wouldn't have PlayStation. That would also mean we wouldn't have any of its great games like God of War, Last of Us, and Crash Bandicoot. That may be the biggest bullet ever dodged by an entertainment company. It worked out for Sony and all of us. Whew!

Dom Rademaker
Brookhaven, MS

Hearing Naughty Dog's Evan Wells and Insomniac Games' Ted Price call the PlayStation 1 the "wild west" era of games is accurate and troubling. They basically gushed about having the freedom to innovate and not follow a formula. For them to say this means times have changed and they no longer have those luxuries. How disappointing.

The Mandalorian
That Rock Planet, Space

Hey *Game Informer*. That was your best issue to date, and I've been reading since issue 105. Please do a deep dive into the history of Xbox next. I LOVED the PlayStation piece.

Victoria Baez
via Email

We're glad you enjoyed the story, and are always looking for deep dives into studios and the making of their games. It's not often that the stars align with a big anniversary and the right people being available to talk to. *Game Informer*'s Jeff Cork put in an immense amount of work to put this complicated story together, and the fine folks at Sony gave us the access and help we needed to make sure the history was told as fully as possible. And yes, we would love to tell the stories of Nintendo and Microsoft, but again, the timing needs to be right.

What Happens After PlayStation 5?

Thanks for taking me on a journey through "The First 25 Years of PlayStation" in the last issue. When I finished the article, I began thinking about the future of games. I'm glad we are getting another traditional console in PlayStation 5. It supports physical media and sounds like it delivers more of what PlayStation fans have come to love. What happens after PlayStation 5 has me worried. Is everything going to be streamed like Stadia? Will consumers no longer own their games? I fear we are moving to a future where a game could be listed on a streaming channel one day and then be removed the next.

Ted Volt
Chicago, IL

There may come a day where everything is streamed and new games are added and removed from channels, but we have a feeling Sony, Nintendo, Microsoft, and any other player that enters the field, wants to attract as many players as possible. For now, and perhaps long into the future, that means giving players options. Some buy physical or digital games, others just want to stream them or subscribe to them. Choice matters in entertainment, and we don't see that changing anytime soon. Of course, according to the Sony's PlayStation 9 commerical from a few years back, the future is carrying around a snowglobe.

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

Brass Lion

Kudos to you guys for publishing the story on Brass Lion. It's a little sad to think their approach to inclusion is visionary in these times, but it is. It's refreshing to know that industry professionals with some serious credentials are trying to make a game with these lofty ideals and that there is a media outlet that will tell their story. As a Dominican/Puerto Rican born in NY I have never seen "us" represented in a game that isn't a sports title. I'm sure there are some obscure examples, but certainly not many, and even fewer as a main story character. But I'm not excited because the main protagonist is Latino, but more so because of the intention behind it. I sincerely hope to see future updates from you all on this team. You guys always do a great job and this article got me PSYCHED! Thank you.

Marshall O.
via email

Diversity within development studios as well as in the games themselves is no small matter, and we were excited to tell Brass Lion's story as they try to make "diversity" more than a buzzword. Hopefully the title conveys the weight of its topic, and we'll keep you updated on its progress in the future. We are always looking for games that try something new or have something different to say, and we're glad developers are stepping forward with these experiences in big ways.

The Missing Bat

If I had to list my Top 25 games of all time, all three of Rocksteady's Batman: Arkham titles would be on there. They are brilliant depictions of this beloved comic-book character, and are just good fun to play. Why did they stop making them? It seems like they were on a roll similar to Marvel's Cinematic Universe. I would take one every year.

Kara Andersen
Fayetteville, AR

Why we don't get more of what we love is one of the great mysteries of video games. Where's Half-Life 3? Why did Warner Bros. stop making Batman games? We agree with you about the series ending too quickly, but it may not be because of franchise fatigue or poor sales. Sometimes game development doesn't go as planned. Some titles get canceled, others delayed. We're hoping Warner has new Batman titles in the works, and that Rocksteady is working on something superhero related, but they could also be working on Harry Potter, or The Matrix, or any one of Warner's big franchises.

User Experience May Vary

I've been hearing a lot of talk about Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order's many glitches and bugs. I've been enjoying the game so far, am I the only one who hasn't experienced any of those problems?

Christian Pinto
via email

In a movie, if a boom mic is in view, there's a good chance most theatergoers will see it. In a game, a glitch or bug that affects one player may never been seen by most others. That's both the beauty and frustration of games. Some players will never see them, while others may rage quit because of them. Jedi: Fallen Order has been criticized for its bugs and rough edges by many players and critics (us included), but they don't ruin what is otherwise an outstanding game.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"The new generation of games is so close. I fear Cyberpunk 2077 is going to get delayed a year and only appear on those machines. Thoughts?"

CD Projekt Red says Cyberpunk is running on current-gen machines. There's a good chance the game ALSO appears on next-gen systems down the road, but we doubt CD Projekt will move away from machines with huge install bases.

"Would games be better off if they were all $20?"

Would they sell more copies? Yes. Would they sell enough to make up the $40 gap? We doubt it.

"I have over 300 Funko Pop toys. Does anyone at Game Informer collect them?"

Reiner has all of the Overwatch Pops, and there are roughly a dozen different Pops spread across Game Informer's office.

Best Comment:

"I listed Phoenix Wright as a reference on an application and I got the job!"

Question Of The Month:

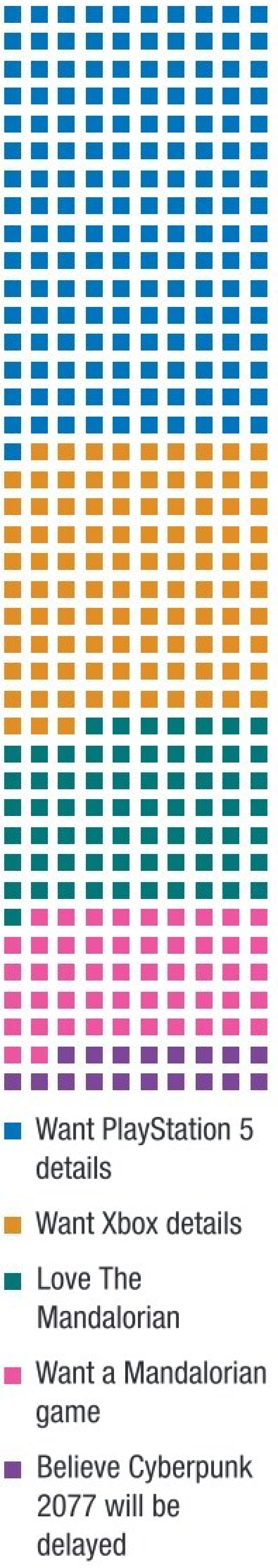
Which games shouldn't have been on our Top 50 list and which ones did we miss?

gi spy

(Left) When asked by Phil Spencer if he wanted a photo or exclusive Xbox details, Brian chose wisely **(Right)** Cryptic's Barclay Chantel, Stephen Ricossa, and Adam Hetenyi dream of a world with more than one cupcake

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

On Your Mind



Fallout Subscription Isn't Bad?

I just read the Good, Bad, and Ugly section in Issue 320. I am a bit confused as to why you placed Fallout 76 1st in the Bad segment. I understand that it is controversial, at least to some people, but it is not required to play the game. Looking at the benefits of the subscription, they far outweigh the cost. There is no actual content locked behind the subscription, but you gain access to a few cosmetics, junk storage, private worlds, and more Atoms per month than the cost of the subscription (regardless of if you pay monthly or annually). I have played since the beta, and while I am not a Fallout 1st member, I have several friends that are. I see no issue with the subscription, and only benefits in the long run, as it is an influx of money to the development team to help fund the ongoing content additions and bug fixes in the game.

Ben Wallace
via email

Developers often charge players for private server or world usage, but putting cosmetic items and gameplay systems like additional storage behind a paywall is pushing players to open their wallets just to access the full depth of the game. No one likes getting nickel and dimed, and that appears to be happening in Fallout 76.

1st
1st MEMBER

Delightful Surprises

In issue 321 we asked our readers what game surprised them the most in 2019. Here's their response …

I thought Apex Legends would be a throwaway game since it didn't have any marketing or previews before its release, but it's now THE game I play the most. The gunplay and movement are second to none. It blows Call of Duty out of the water.

Eric Finnier

Without question, it's Resident Evil 2. I grew up loving the original, and I think I like this remake more.

Chenoa Baxter

I know I'm going to get mocked for this, but I really enjoyed Anthem. Yes, it has some issues with variety and pacing, but I had such a good time playing it with friends. We fell off of it after completing everything on the highest difficulty, but that doesn't mean it wasn't a great experience that I'll remember forever. Thank you, BioWare. You made a group of four friends super happy.

Raven Cole

Man of Medan and Far Cry: New Dawn won't be on my personal top 10 list this year, but deserve credit for the thrills they delivered. Man of Medan kept me on the edge of my seat, and I got way into building up my base in Far Cry.

"The Whisperer"

Studio Quality Photos in Seconds!

(Left) Game Informer's graphic designer and resident dice-maker Jen Vinson protects our conference room from the long winter **(Right)** Tim Schafer says goodbye to Greg Rice, who left Double Fine to become Sony's global head of indie accounts

WINNER

1 Sonia Vazquez

The crossover event you didn't know you wanted! Kirby x Avengers!

2 Gabriel Dunn

The defeat of Bowser brings much needed rest. Here's hoping we get another Mario game in 2020

3 Jack Crigger

A perfect example why you should never look back in life

4 Jamie Strickland

This Splatoon art is perfect for a T-shirt

5 Sarah Brown

Put a cloak on Link and he looks 10 years older … wait … Nope. He still looks like a 12-year-old

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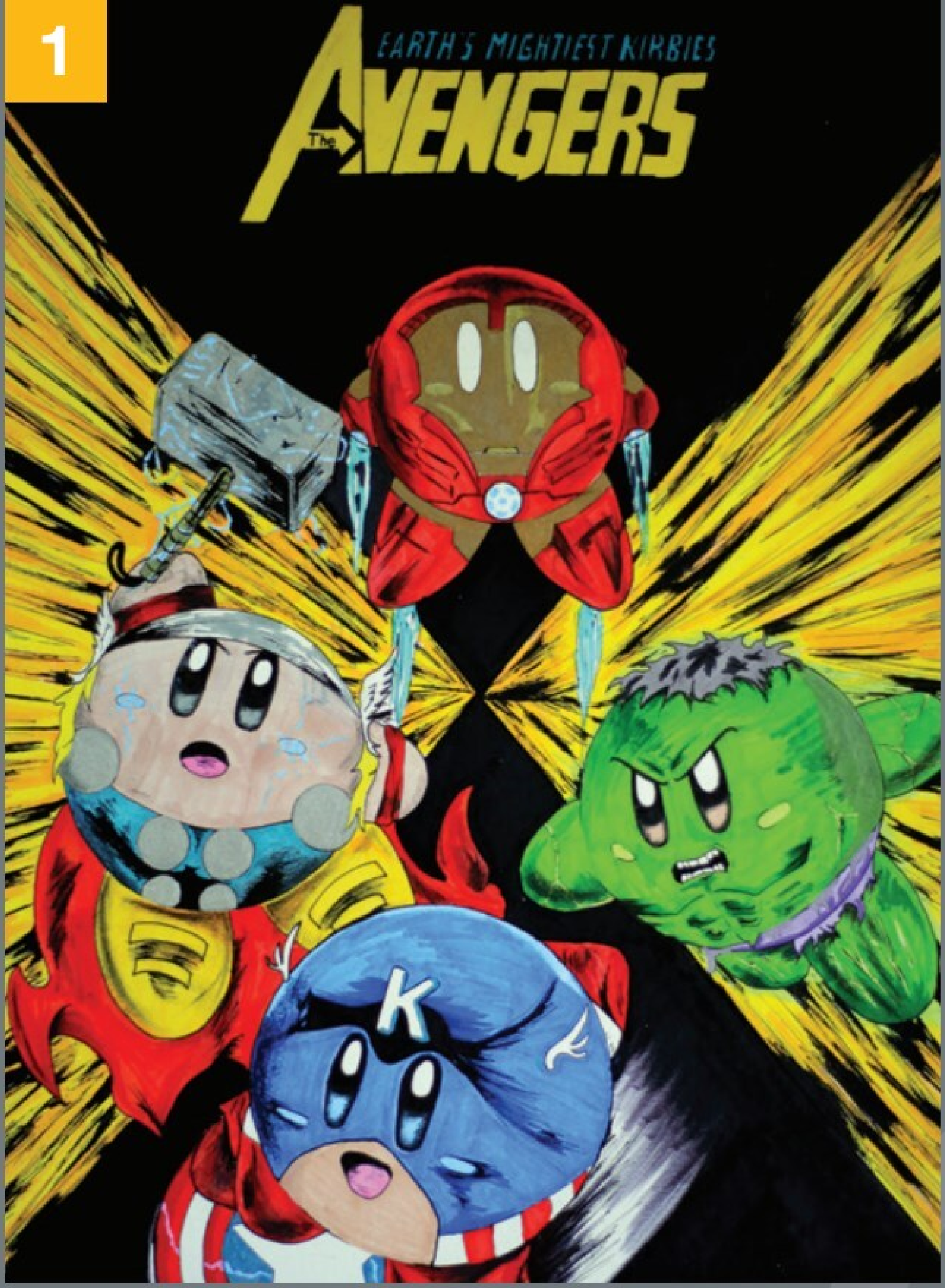

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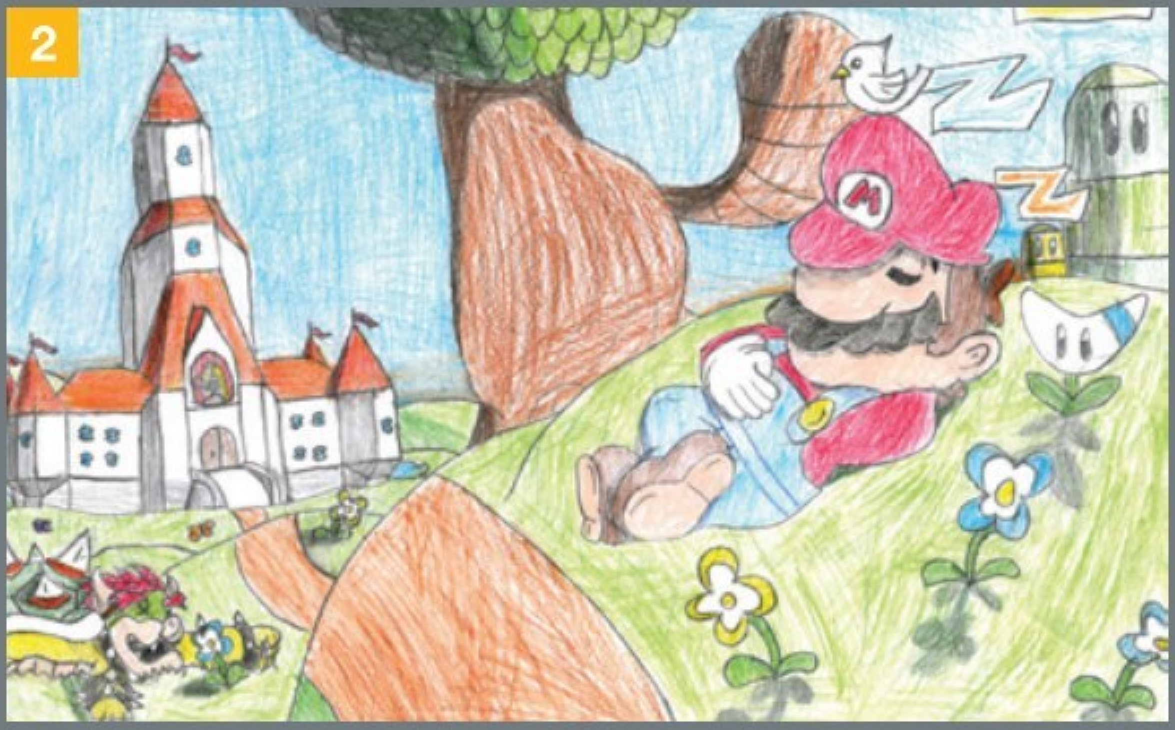

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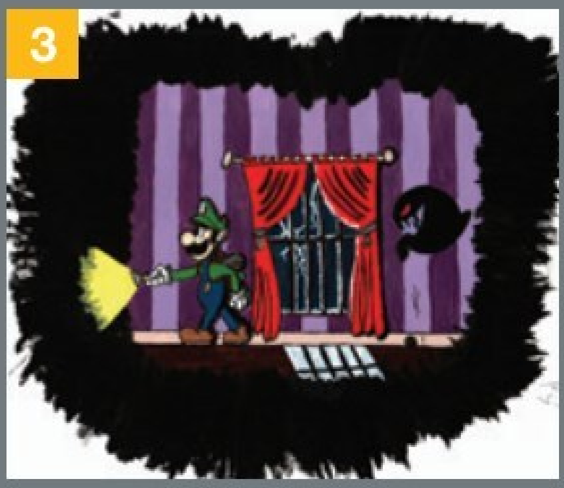

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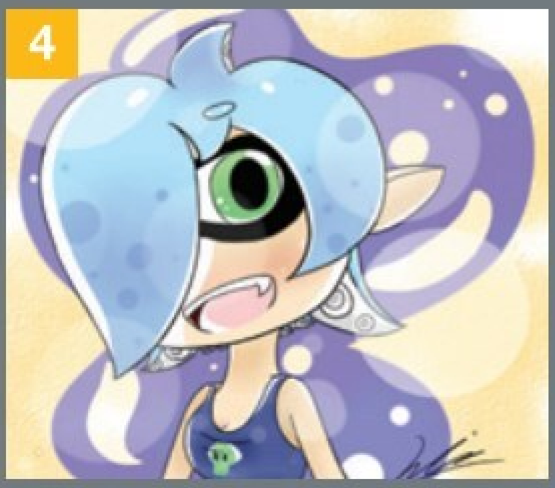

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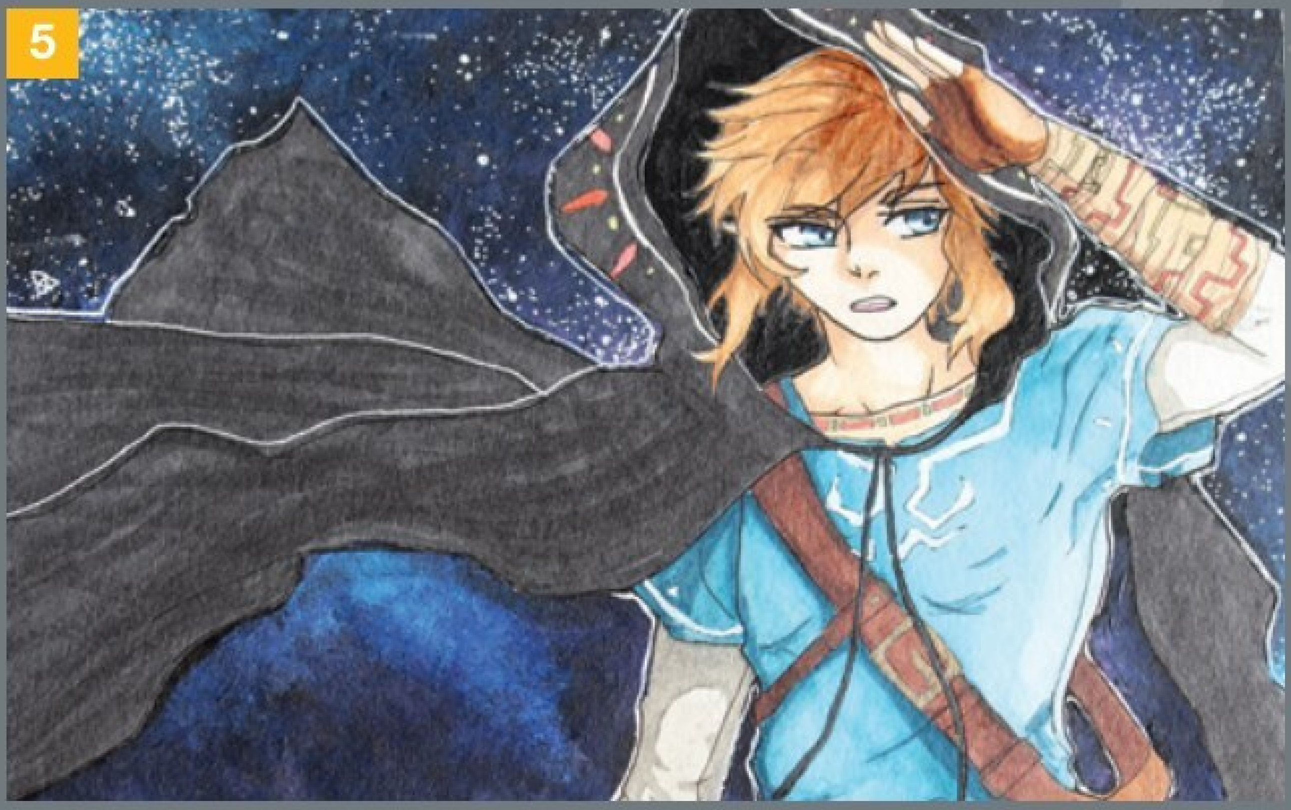

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(Left) Andy catches up with Terry Huang, who used to handle PR for Sega for the Saturn **(Right)** Andy and Fortnite champion Bugha share a moment before The Game Awards *by Matthew Kato*

INTRODUCING THE NEW XBOX

In a surprise announcement, Phil Spencer, head of Xbox, took to the stage at *The Game Awards* to reveal the company's next system coming in holiday 2020, simply called the Xbox. The version of the console that will be released at that time is called the Series X, leaving room for the company to put out other iterations of the system similar to how Microsoft has released multiple versions of the Xbox One this generation.

Previously dubbed Project Scarlett, Microsoft is positioning the Xbox as both tied to the current generation as well as an incredibly powerful system capable of defining the future. The system uses custom AMD Zen 2 and RDNA architecture for four times the processing power of the Xbox One X. The Xbox Series X is visually capable of 8K and 120FPS, along with other amenities to increase power, fidelity, and speed: ray-tracing for realistic lighting, variable rate shading (VRS) for increased and more efficient graphics processing, a solid state drive for fast loading, overall decreased latency, and more.

Microsoft has also made sure the new Xbox accommodates your existing Xbox One software, accessories, achievements, and saves. It also contains a disc drive. Furthermore, the company has expressed a continuing commitment to overarching initiatives such as its Game Pass subscription, cross-platform play, Play Anywhere with Windows 10 PCs, and the Project xCloud streaming program.

The Xbox Series X visually signals form-factor continuity with the Xbox One line of systems due to the Series X's black matte finish and clean lines. Although the initial presentation of the console projects a vertical, monolithic presence, it can also be laid on its side. Its main venting appears to be out of the top of the console (when vertical), which shouldn't interfere with its cooling functionality when placed horizontally. Microsoft says that despite the Xbox Series X's overall power and small footprint, it's a relatively quiet system.

The console's controller has also been revealed (naturally it comes included in the box), and although it looks very similar to the existing base Xbox One controller, the new Xbox controller has been redesigned. Its shape has been altered slightly to accommodate more hand sizes, and it has a dedicated share button in the middle. The d-pad – similar to the one on the Xbox One Elite Series 2 controller – is also new.

Returning to the simple Xbox moniker may be a little confusing, but it's part of a multi-console approach like the Xbox One and Xbox One X. A Microsoft representative told *Business Insider*, "Similar to what fans have seen with previous generations, the name 'Xbox Series X' allows room for additional consoles in the future."

Microsoft is rumored to be working on a smaller, cheaper, and disc-less system codenamed Lockhart, but at the time of this writing, no official announcements regarding other versions of the Xbox other than Series X have been made. The company also hasn't talked about the price of the Xbox Series X, among other details. But with the system's design, current known capabilities, and debut of Senua's Saga: Hellblade II, it's already made a good impression.

Senua's Saga: Hellblade II

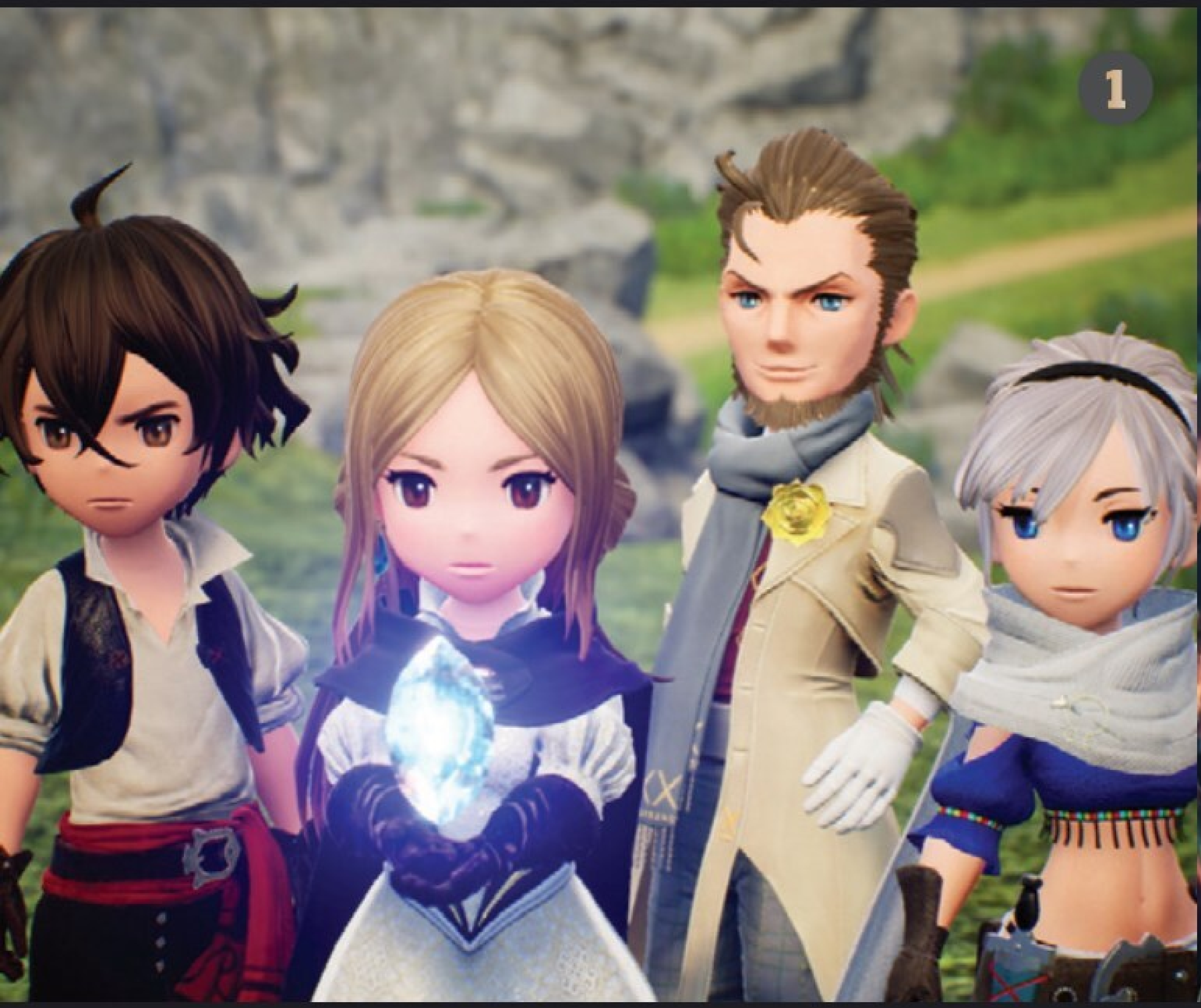
Head of Xbox Phil Spencer said at the *The Game Awards* that developers are already making games for the next generation of Xbox, and he showed first-party effort Senua's Saga: Hellblade II by Ninja Theory.

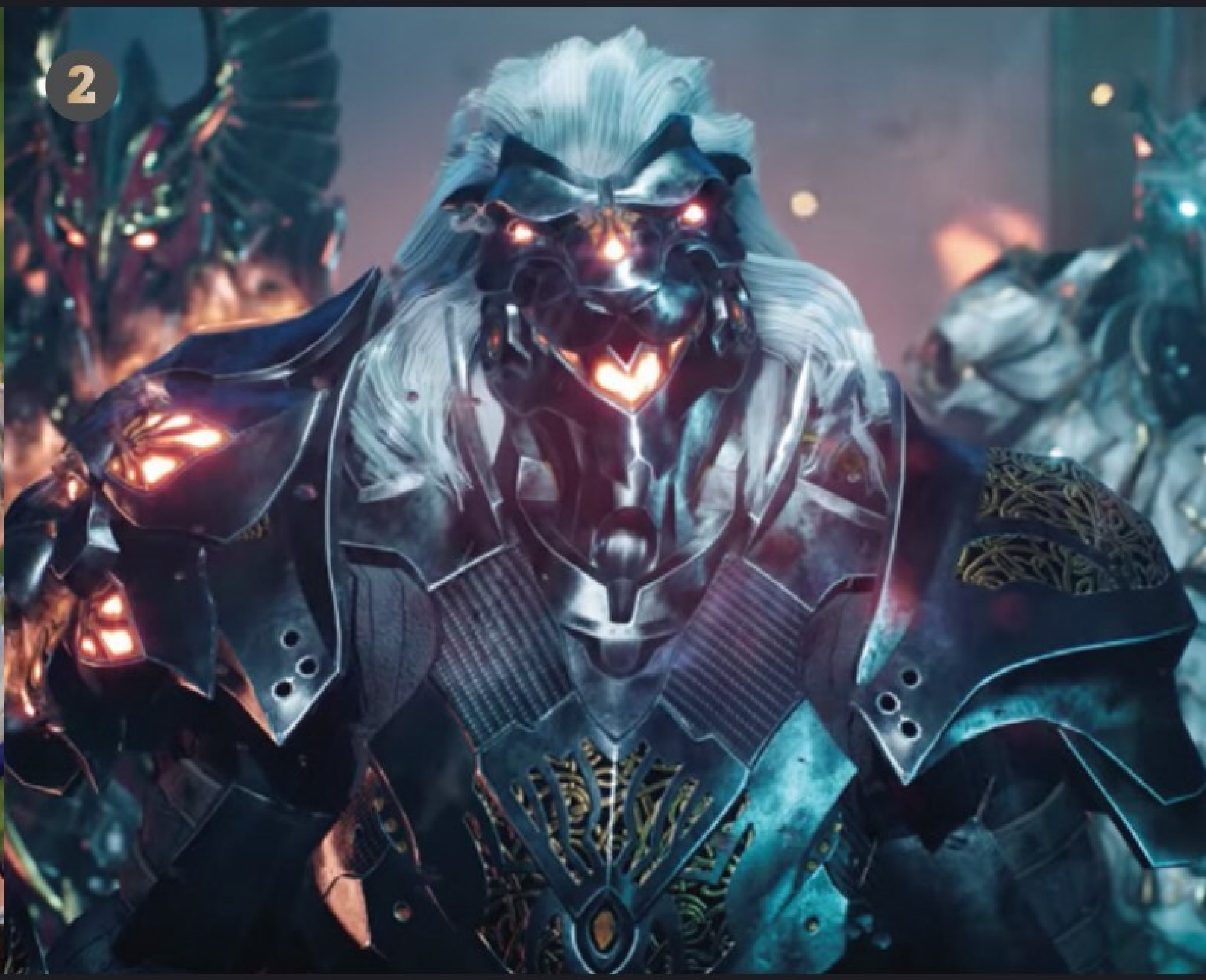
The trailer doesn't reveal much, but certainly the presence of Senua herself signals that the developer will continue to explore the theme of mental illness that marked Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice back in 2017. The in-engine footage shown was taken directly from the Xbox, seemingly speaking to the horsepower of the console. This glimpse raises our hopes that the world of Senua's Saga will be more open than the first Hellblade while losing none of its darkness or the sometimes-skewed perspective of Senua herself.

Whether Hellblade II will appear at the launch of the system is unknown at the time of this writing. So far only Halo Infinite has that distinction. However, Spencer said that on the first-party side, Microsoft has 15 internal studios working on projects for the console.

THE MOST EXCITING TRAILERS OF THE 2019 GAME AWARDS

The Game Awards **had one of its biggest shows yet in 2019, showing off several new projects from developers around the world. In most cases, those early glimpses took the form of video premieres, which offer hints of what we can expect from each game.** *by Game Informer Staff*





Bravely Default II ①

Platform: Switch

RPG fans got an unexpected reveal in Bravely Default II. Coming from the same team who worked on previous games – and more recently Octopath Traveler – the new title is a successor to the original Bravely Default, a beloved game that helped show Square Enix there was still a market for niche RPGs with a more classic design. Bravely Default II is all about having a clean slate, with a new story, Heroes of Light, and world setting. While this is technically the third game in the franchise (Bravely Second: End Layer, a direct sequel to the original launched in 2016), the name seems to play off this new beginning with it not being directly tied to events from previous entries. The trailer didn't reveal much, but we did see the gorgeous signature art style, hand-drawn environments, and four heroes standing together atop of a mountain with one holding a crystal. Thankfully, we won't have to wait too long to see what's in store as Bravely Default II is coming exclusively to Nintendo Switch in 2020.

Godfall ②

Platform: PlayStation 5, PC

As one of the few confirmed PlayStation 5 games, Godfall is a next-generation action/RPG from publisher Gearbox and developer Counterplay Games. The brief reveal trailer features multi-headed beasts, flaming swords, and heroes in elaborate suits of armor – all with an aesthetic that seems to mix mythology and technology. Godfall aims to merge the intensity of skill-based melee combat with the satisfying rush of loot collection; players shape their character builds and tear through grunts and bosses in hopes of getting legendary gear. You can take on these challenges alone, but the experience also accommodates co-op for up to three players, with sword slashes and magic flying in all directions. Godfall hits PlayStation 5 and Epic Games Store during the 2020 holiday season.

Ruined King: A League of Legends Story ③

Platform: PC, Console

Convergence: A League of Legends Story

Platform: TBA

The League of Legends IP is expanding with the Riot Forge label, which allows third-party developers to team up with Riot and use its extensive universe to tell new stories. Two different single-player titles that tap into League of Legends lore were announced.

With a quick glimpse of Thresh's lantern, the first trailer revealed little more than a name – Ruined King: A League of Legends Story. Airship Syndicate (Battle Chasers: Nightwar) is developing the game for both console and PC, and it features turn-based combat.

Convergence: A League of Legends Story was the other game teased. Developed by Double Stallion, the game is an action platformer that tasks players with exploring the city of Zaun. Playing as Ekko, you can manipulate time to alter the world around you.

Fast & Furious Crossroads ④

Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PC

With a star-studded cast and high-octane action, the Fast & Furious film franchise has become one of the most popular series in the world. Bandai Namco and Slightly Mad Studios hope the increasingly over-the-top vehicular thrill-ride translates to video games well in Fast & Furious Crossroads. In addition to a single-player story, Crossroads also promises a multiplayer mode that will be revealed soon.

Actors like Vin Diesel, Michelle Rodriguez, and Tyrese Gibson are all confirmed to reprise their roles in the game, and with the trailer showcasing everything from street racing and heists to gunfights and tank chases, it looks to have all the staples fans have come to expect from the series. The pieces are all in place, but with the game set to launch alongside the ninth Fast & Furious film's theatrical release, we have to wait until May to see if those bombastic sequences are as fun to play as they are to watch.

The Wolf Among Us 2 ⑤

Platform: PC, Consoles

When the original Telltale Games collapsed in 2018, many assumed that its current projects would never see the light of day. However, in August, LCG Entertainment purchased the Telltale brand and all of its assets. Now the company is continuing to revive Telltale's past work, starting with The Wolf Among Us series. The original The Wolf Among Us was based on DC Comics' *Fables* series, which centered on a group of fairy-tale characters trying to keep a low profile while living in modern-day New York. For the sequel, Telltale is teaming up with developer AdHoc Studio and has hired several developers who worked on the original series, including the original narrative lead and co-directors. We don't have many details on the game at this point since it's still in pre-production, but the studio has confirmed that it will be another episodic series that follows up the story told in the first series. The brief debut teaser gave us a glimpse of franchise mainstays Snow White and the big bad wolf himself, Bigby.

Weird West ⑥

Platform: PC

At first glance, Weird West doesn't appear to be all that weird. The brief trailer shows a variety of western archetypes, such as a pioneer family and a prospector panning for gold. What's that, though? Those aren't gold nuggets in the miner's gold pan, but human teeth. And why is that pig-masked feller pulling a body toward a crudely drawn pentagram? All right. Weirdness confirmed. WolfEye Studios' first game brings a macabre twist to a familiar genre in an all-new action/RPG.

The studio was founded by Julien Roby and Raphael Colantonio, former Arkane Studios developers who created the Dishonored series and the Prey reboot. Now they're taking their immersive-sim sensibilities to a new stage, where gunslingers and cultists coexist in an unforgiving land. According to the studio, players can ride with a solo hero or control a posse of characters in a world that reacts to your actions and doles out consequences. ◆

THE BEST TABLETOP GAMES OF 2019

The board-gaming hobby continued its steady rise this year, fueled by a bevy of stellar releases, featuring captivating options for everyone, from families looking for a new shared hobby, to longtime veterans hoping to flex their strategic muscles.

BY MATT MILLER

Discover more of the best tabletop games of 2019, including a round-up of the best role-playing game releases of the year, at gameinformer.com/topofthetable

Cthulhu
Death May Die

Cthulhu: Death May Die

(CMON)

LOVECRAFTIAN INVESTIGATORS FIGHT BACK IN THIS ACTION/ HORROR MASH-UP

The ubiquitous Cthulhu board game is virtually a genre unto itself at this point, but Death May Die turns the concept on its head in several ways, upping the action and embracing the insanity. Players actively work to summon Elder Gods into the world, with the goal of destroying these abominations once and for all. Each episode is surprisingly different from all the others, and the fast-paced action vibe is a riot.

Nemesis

(Awaken Realms/Rebel)

VETERAN SCI-FI WARRIORS BETTER BE READY FOR A CHALLENGE

While it's certainly not a licensed game, you may as well think of this as the definitive board game take on the Alien movie concept. Players work as a semi-cooperative group, each with their own goals, as they desperately try to flee a doomed ship and get back to Earth, even as horrific alien beings invade. Full of climactic emergent story moments and tense battles, Nemesis is a standout success squarely targeted at experienced hobbyists.

Dune

(Gale Force Nine)

LEAD YOUR HOUSE TO VICTORY.
THE SPICE MUST FLOW.

The Dune board game from 1979 is a lauded classic of early thematic strategy games. Gale Force Nine has revived the original with new art and some important rules evolutions, but the core of the cutthroat competition remains intact. Embody the likes of Paul Atreides and Baron Harkonnen and their forces to control the spice mélange, the most powerful resource in existence. Intricate and unforgiving, but thematically rich, Dune is a game of big highs and crushing lows.

ISHTAR
Gardens of Babylon

Ishtar: Gardens of Babylon

(IELLO)

HELP PLANTS GROW AND
OPPONENTS WITHER IN THIS
PURE STRATEGY JEWEL

You are a gardener, competing with the other players to transform a bone-dry desert into the fabled Hanging Gardens of Babylon. Carefully place tiles, gather precious gem resources, activate actions, and block your opponents' efforts as you shape your botanical marvel. Ishtar is an ideal choice for gamers who want a strategically nuanced experience that can still be completed in under an hour.

The LORD OF THE RINGS
JOURNEYS IN MIDDLE-EARTH

The Lord of the Rings: Journeys in Middle-earth

(Fantasy Flight Games)

FOR A CONSISTENT TEAM
OF FANTASY FANS READY FOR
A BIG CAMPAIGN

Tolkien's sprawling fantasy world comes to life in this epic cooperative campaign board game. Much of the heavy lifting of rules and scenario management is offloaded to a digital app, letting you focus on the battles and encounters that shape your party's adventure. One session dovetails naturally into the next, coming together as an interconnected tale that sees your heroes grow more powerful with every quest.

MARVEL
CHAMPIONS
THE CARD GAME

Marvel Champions

(Fantasy Flight Games)

ASSEMBLE SOME SUPERHEROES
WHO REGULARLY TEAM UP

Team up with your friends for this cooperative card game, in which players take on the roles of icons like Iron Man and Spider-Man to confront the likes of Ultron and Rhino in fierce, fast-paced battles. Juggle the unique capabilities of your costumed hero against their alter ego's special skills to win the day. New heroes and villains are being added post-launch, transforming Champions into an ongoing living game worth exploring over time.

PARKS
KEYMASTER GAMES
1-5
10+

Parks

(Keymaster Games)

HIKE THE NATIONAL PARKS
OF THE U.S. IN THIS
CELEBRATION OF NATURE

Built in artistic cooperation with the printmaking masters at Fifty-Nine Parks, this beautiful homage to nature challenges players to explore the National Parks, collecting memories of the vistas visited, photos taken, and other experiences gained while hiking scenic trails across the shifting seasons of the year. Gorgeous components and accessible gameplay make this a rewarding competition about enjoying the best idea America ever had.

BATTLE OF
LEGENDS
VOLUME ONE

Unmatched: Battle of Legends

(Restoration Games)

DUELERS SHOULD EMBRACE
THIS EASY-TO-LEARN BUT
ENGROSSING BATTLE

Who would win in a fight between Medusa and King Arthur? How about Bigfoot and Sinbad? An update and reskinning of the classic Star Wars: Epic Duels, the battling miniatures this time around are disparate heroes from across fiction. Smartly balanced between the varied playable combatants, this one is simple enough to play with newcomers, but clever enough to attract experienced players.

WAVELENGTH

Wavelength

(Palm Court)

WORD-LOVING PARTY-GOERS CAN
BRING EVERYONE TO THE TABLE

This fascinating (and incredibly simple) new party game is all about understanding where a word fits between two extremes. One player provides a clue to everyone else, and a card that depicts two extremes, like hot and cold, or round and pointy. Everyone else debates and tries to guess a hidden value for where the clue word fits, conceptually, between the two extremes. Fun, funny, and a blast for group play.

Wingspan

(Stonemaier Games)

FOR BIRD WATCHERS WITH
A COMPETITIVE STREAK

Attract the best and most varied avians to your nature preserve in this stunningly illustrated and rewarding engine-building game. If you're looking for a change of pace from fantasy wars and epic adventures, Wingspan's varied paths to victory make it deeply replayable and multi-layered in strategic complexity. Perfect for bird lovers, but anyone with an eye for elegance and aesthetics will recognize this as one of the year's best. ◈

The Good

Touch 'em all. The lauded **MLB THE SHOW** series is spreading over to other platforms beyond the PlayStation starting as early as 2021. No specific systems have been announced yet, but it's interesting that both the official Nintendo and Xbox Twitter accounts responded enthusiastically to the announcement.

The Bad

It's a sadly funny turn of circumstances that VR title **HALF-LIFE: ALYX** ghosted The Game Awards at the last minute given that developer Valve has already kept fans waiting this long for something – anything – from one of gaming's more popular franchises.

The Ugly

RUNE II publisher Ragnarok is suing developer Human Head after the publisher charges that the studio closed its doors and formed a new company (Roundhouse Studios) the next day with a deal with Bethesda already in hand. The lawsuit claims Human Head concealed its plans to join Bethesda and abandon its contractual obligation to support the title after launch. At the time of this writing, Ragnarok is trying to obtain the game's assets from Roundhouse so the publisher can continue to support and deliver new content for the title. ◆

Quotable

"We are a deeply experienced group of game makers, including many responsible for BioShock's principal creation, advancement, and longstanding notoriety, and honored to be part of the 2K family as stewards of this iconic franchise."

Kelley Gilmore, global studio head of new 2K internal studio Cloud Chamber, which has started on the next BioShock game.

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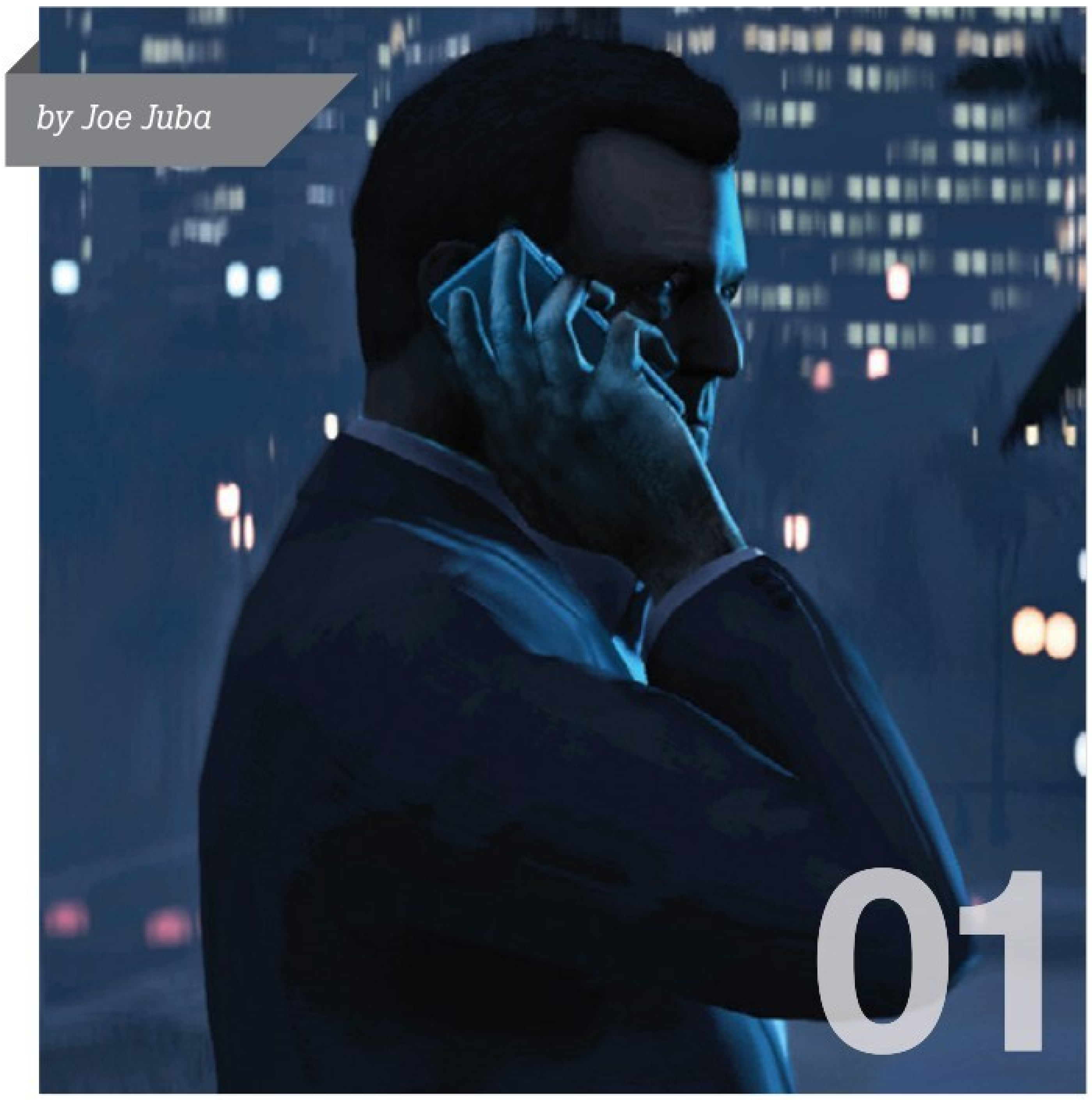
Only at Walmart

GAMES OF THE DECADE

by Joe Juba



Grand Theft Auto V

Rockstar Games proves that players don't have to choose between quality and quantity. Grand Theft Auto V's massive open world, groundbreaking online mode, and outstanding single-player campaign make it the decade's premier combination of ambition and execution.

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

With Skyrim's rich fantasy setting, Bethesda Game Studios gives you the freedom to forge your own story. The Dragonborn's power grows with a wide selection of cool skills, and the characters and world provide fun arcs to explore.

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt

Geralt's sprawling search for Ciri is compelling on its own, but the well-crafted side missions are what bring CD Projekt Red's RPG to another level. With surprising and unintended repercussions, all of your decisions matter here.

Mass Effect 2

The middle of Shepard's saga is where BioWare finds the ideal balance of Mass Effect's elements. It has hard choices, great companions, and a climactic suicide mission that leaves you shouting in triumph or sobbing in heartbreak

God of War

Kratos is no longer the revenge-driven beast he was. Sony Santa Monica flips that portrayal with an older, quieter warrior learning to be a father. Despite being more subdued, Kratos' skill in battle remains sharp as a blade.

Red Dead Redemption II

The first Red Dead Redemption is great, but the sequel truly makes the Wild West feel alive. Rockstar's dynamic world is full of surprises, and the adventures of Arthur, Dutch, and the rest of the gang are the stuff of legends.

The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild

Nintendo's reinvention of Zelda makes the familiar fresh again, with a beautiful and dangerous world full of mysteries. Versatile combat and exploration emphasize the joy of discovery, all under the ever-looming presence of Ganon.

The Last of Us

Zombie-filled, post-apocalyptic worlds are plentiful, but only one has Naughty Dog's amazing aptitude for emotional storytelling. Joel and Ellie's journey has a tense and bittersweet quality that raises the bar for gaming narratives.

Bloodborne

Many of From Software's games are defined by deliberate combat and phenomenal boss battles. Bloodborne refines those signature elements within its haunting, Lovecraftian setting to create chilling moments that set this entry apart.

Overwatch

Blizzard polishes and perfects the formula for hero shooters with Overwatch. A huge cast of colorful characters, accessible controls, and great opportunities for teamwork make this a multiplayer experience with something for everyone. ◆

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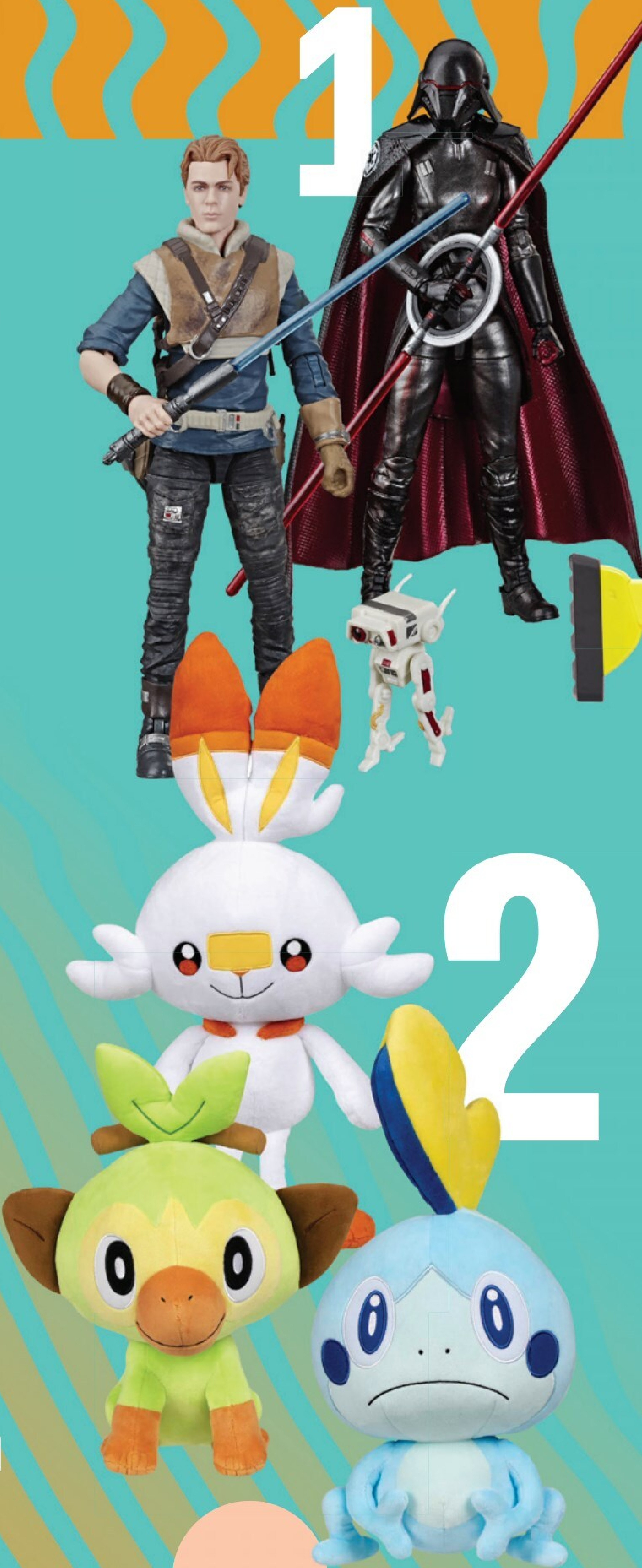
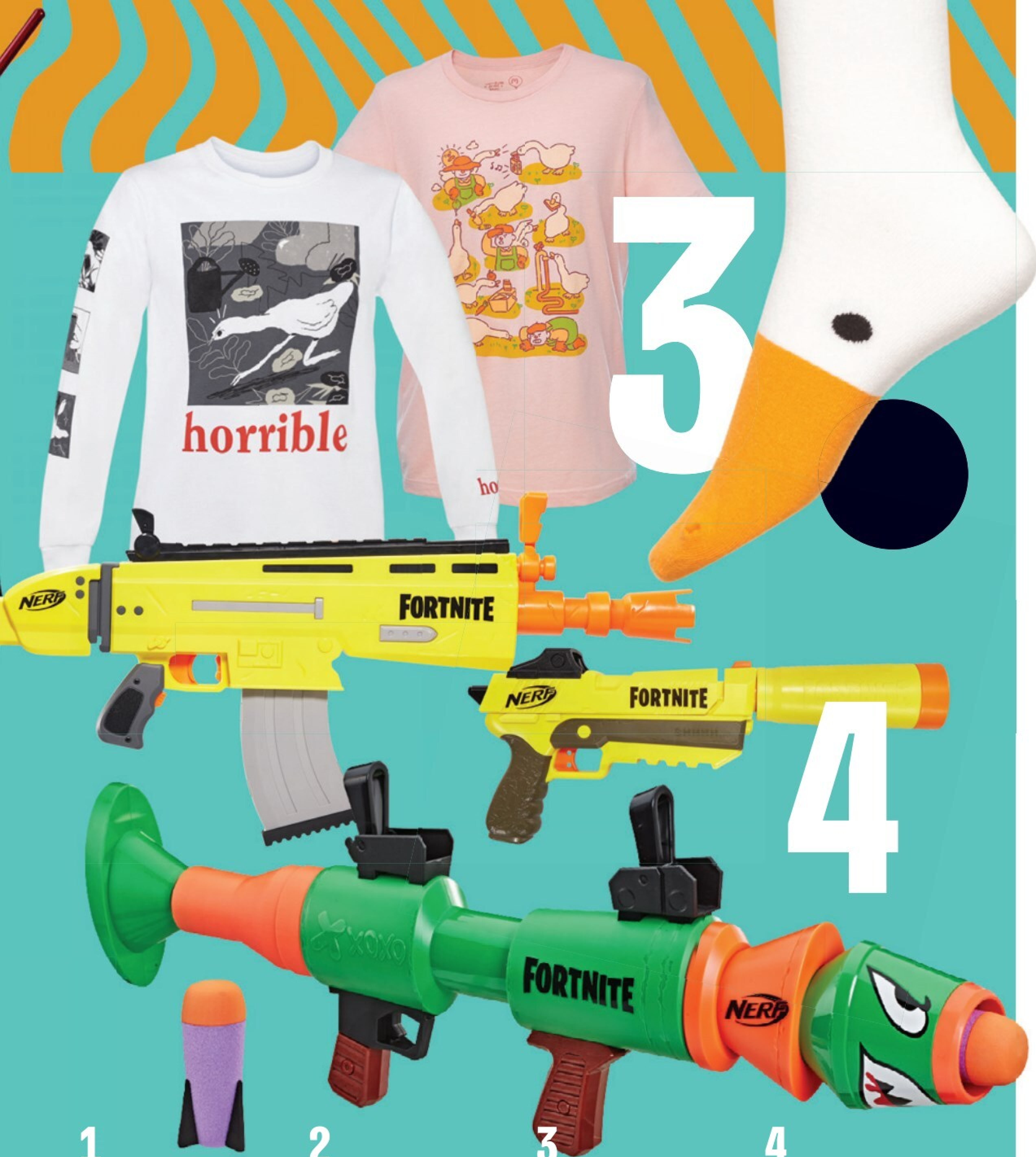
SHOP 50

MERCHANDISE RELATED TO OUR TOP 50 GAMES OF THE YEAR

BY BEN REEVES





1

Cal, BD-1, and Second Sister Action Figures

Relive the adventures of Respawn's stellar Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order with these six-inch figures from Hasbro's The Black Series, built using highly detailed sculps. Cal Kestis' figure is so accurate that it has the same level of personality he expresses in the game.

$19.99
starwars.hasbro.com

2

Pokémon Sword & Shield Starter Plushies

Pokémon Sword & Shield might have the most adorable set of starter Pokémon we've seen in years. If you can't decide who to pick, why not get all three? These official plush versions of Grookey, Scorbunny, and Sobble all have embroidered facial features and stand as tall as their in-game Pokédex entries.

$50.00
pokemoncenter.com

3

Untitled Goose Game Apparel

There is a tiny, squawking mischief-maker inside us all. If you're ready to wear that irritating-but-lovable part of yourself on your sleeve then check out Untitled Goose Game's official store, which is full of cutesy shirts and socks made from 100 percent cotton.

Starting at $20.00
shop.goose.game

4

Fortnite X Nerf

Next time you get dropped into a backyard royale, bring some foam heat with these Fortnite-themed Nerf guns. The SP-L features a removable "silencer," while the RL Blaster shoots giant foam rockets, and the AR-L packs a 20-dart clip and an internal motor for rapid firing. No matter your weapon of choice, you'll be king of the sandcastle. You kids play nice now.

Starting at $19.99
nerf.hasbro.com

THE ART OF
DEATH STRANDING
DESTINY
GRIMOIRE
ANTHOLOGY
OUTER WILDS
MUSIC COMPOSED BY ANDREW PRAHLOW

The Art of Death Stranding

Whether you enjoyed Hideo Kojima's expensive tripping simulator or not, it was at least easy to look at. Titan Books' giant hardback explores Death Stranding's stunning art design and features tons of gorgeous concept art from acclaimed artist Yoji Shinkawa.

$35.95
titanbooks.com

Destiny Grimoire Anthology, Volume II: Fallen Kingdoms

It is time to unpack Destiny's complex and scattered lore. This tome collects many of the myths and legends from the Destiny universe into one digestible place, helping fans shed new light on the cosmic war between the Traveler and its ancient enemies.

$24.99
bungiestore.com

Outer Wilds Official Soundtrack

The main theme for the indie hit Outer Wilds is so catchy it has been stuck in a time loop in our heads for months. Thankfully, the rest of Andrew Prahlow's folksy, ambient soundtrack is also worth putting on repeat.

Free
spotify.com

①

February2020

GAME RELEASES

Tuesday 04
- The Dark Crystal: Age of Resistance Tactics (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC, Mac)
- Zombie Army 4: Dead War (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

Thursday 06
- Granblue Fantasy Versus (PS4)

Friday 14
- Darksiders Genesis (PS4, Xbox One, Switch)
- Dreams (PS4)
- Street Fighter V Champion Edition (PS4, PC)

Friday 28
- Iron Man VR (PSVR) ①
- One Punch Man: A Hero Nobody Knows (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

②

MOVIE & TV PREMIERES

Wednesday 05
- Lego Masters (Fox)

Thursday 06
- Brooklyn Nine-Nine (NBC)
- Katy Keene (CW)

Friday 07
- Birds of Prey: And the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn (theaters)
- Locke & Key (Netflix)

Sunday 09
- 92nd Annual Academy Awards (ABC)

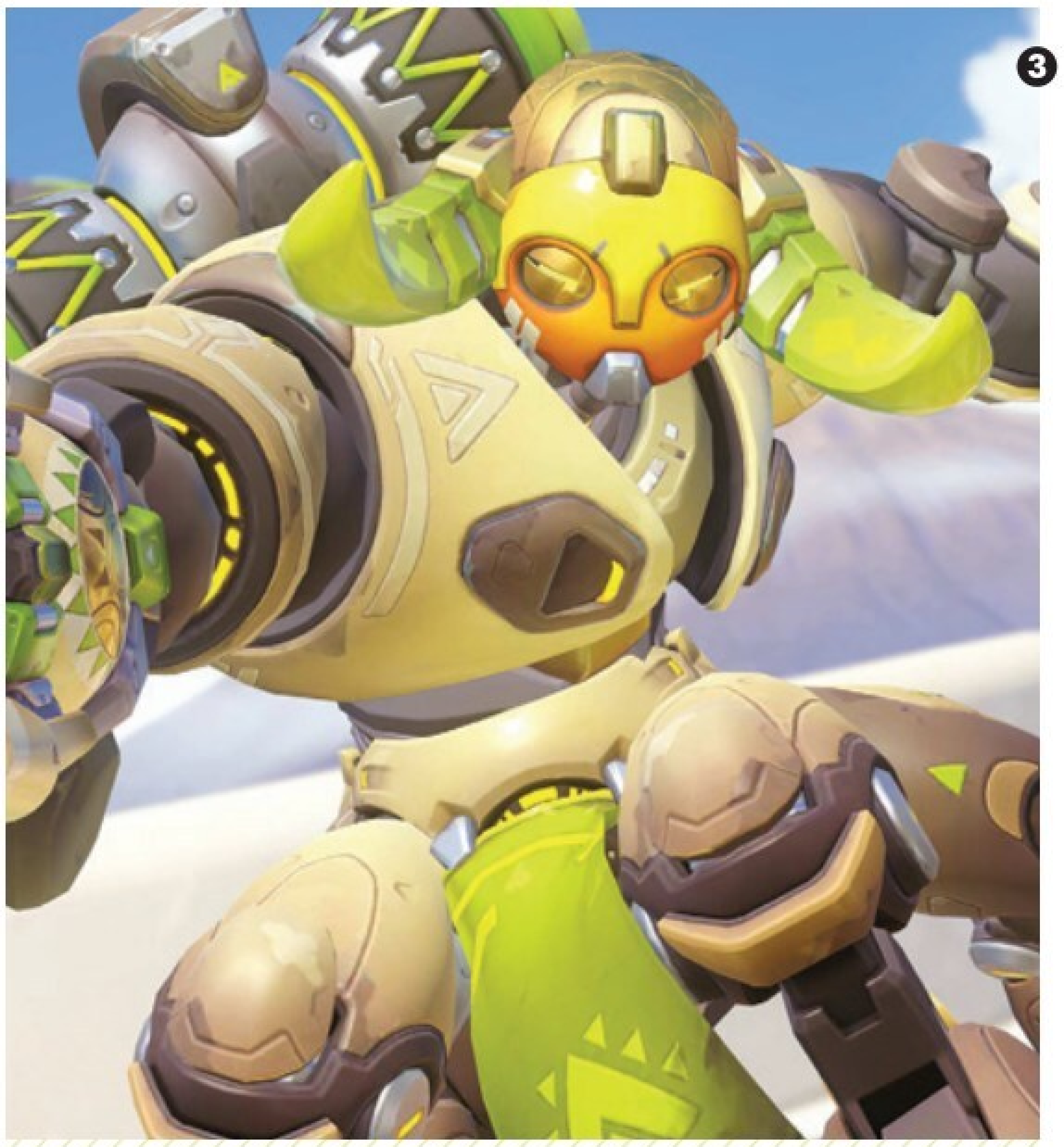
Wednesday 12
- Survivor (CBS)

Friday 14
- Sonic the Hedgehog (theaters) ②

Sunday 16
- War of the Worlds (Epix)

Friday 21
- Bloodshot (theaters)

Sunday 23
- Better Call Saul (AMC)
- The Walking Dead (AMC)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GAMER CULTURE

Saturday 01
X-Men vs. Fantastic Four
Last year's exceptional X-Men reimagining continues to grow in size, and in a new four-issue X-Men/Fantastic Four series, Franklin Richards will have to choose between a new home on Krakoa and staying with his family. Marvel says "nothing will ever be the same" after this series.

Saturday 08
Overwatch League 2020 ③
The third season of Overwatch League kicks off today in both New York and Dallas. Over the course of the season, matches will be played in 19 different cities, giving most teams a true hometown advantage for the first time. The season concludes on August 9.

Tuesday 11
D.I.C.E.
Key talent from the video game industry travel to Las Vegas for three days of discussions about the future of games. Many of their talks will be streamed online, as are the 23rd Annual D.I.C.E. Awards. God of War took home the top honors last year.

Thursday 27
PAX East
Boston streets will once again be filled with video game cosplay when PAX arrives today and runs for four days. New games, tournaments, and shopping are all on the agenda.

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MAKING MAGIC

Cryptic Studios tackles one of the biggest IPs in gaming, and takes on the challenge of translating cards to combat with *Magic: Legends*

by
Daniel Tack

» PLATFORM
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» STYLE
1 to 3-Player
Online Action/Role-Playing

» PUBLISHER
Perfect World

» DEVELOPER
Cryptic Studios

» RELEASE
2020

IN THE WORLD OF CARD GAMES, MAGIC: THE GATHERING STANDS AS THE BENCHMARK ALL OTHERS ARE MEASURED AGAINST.

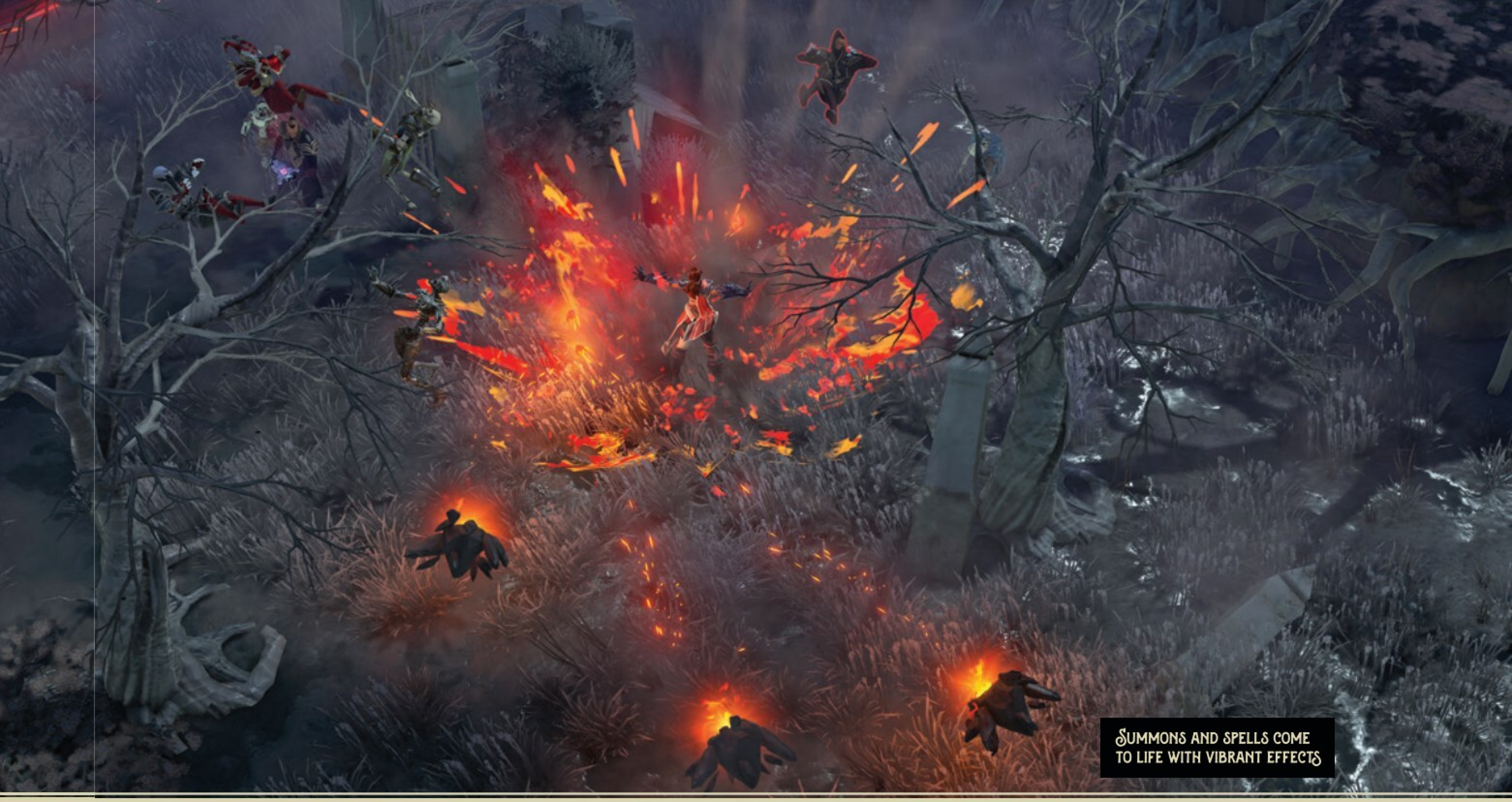
Created by Richard Garfield and released in 1993, the Wizards of the Coast trading-card game continues to captivate mages worldwide, whether they're playing in a local Friday Night Magic, kicking it around the kitchen table with some Commander rules, or saving their paychecks to add a Black Lotus to their collections.

After 25 years, Magic: The Gathering isn't just a card game anymore. With an upcoming Netflix show on the horizon, the Magic brand is branching out heavily from its roots, transforming into a giant media property. With that, aspects ranging from characters to continuity need to be examined with a closer eye than ever before. "Magic is in a place right now where we're moving the IP from something that's primarily expressed through a card frame to something that's expressed through many different forms of media," says senior narrative designer at Wizards of the Coast Gerritt Turner. "Magic's future is as an entertainment franchise, not purely a [card] game franchise. And so a particular point of emphasis for us has been really fleshing out and developing our characters, moving into a world where our stories are driven by the needs and desires of our characters rather than purely by law."

Within that expanding brand space is something Magic has visited before: the video game world. Some games, like Magic: The Gathering Arena, are direct translations of the physical card game. Others, like Magic: The Gathering Battlegrounds or Magic: The Gathering Tactics, offer completely different ways to play with the brand's iconic colors and creatures.

Cryptic Studios is no stranger to working on massive IPs and turning them into online game powerhouses, as it has with Star Trek Online and Dungeons & Dragons: Neverwinter. With Magic: Legends, the developer is embarking on an action/RPG adventure that offers tons of character customization, deck-building, PVP, and progression with many familiar spells and allies. With screen after screen loaded with enemies to annihilate, loot to collect, and planes to explore, the free-to-play online journey can be played solo or with friends.

So how did Cryptic get the chance to make a Magic action/RPG? While the world at large has only been treated to a short teaser, we visited Cryptic's studios in Los Gatos, Calif., to find out how the game came to be, dive deep into the gameplay with hours of hands-on time, and discuss with developers how they're bringing cards to life in this new take on cardslinging.



Summons and spells come to life with vibrant effects

THE CRYPTIC CONNECTION

Cryptic Studios CEO Steven D'Angelo has a long history with Magic. Back in the early '90s, right after the trading-card game debuted, D'Angelo volunteered to help compile and document the game's rules, handling the various rulings and errata the game needed. Without a highly codified rule set, cards were often loaded with complex, ambiguous text or had the potential for unclear interactions, which is where D'Angelo came in. After his volunteer days, D'Angelo went to work for Wizards of the Coast, where he spent nearly a decade helping to refine and manage the rules, handing down lessons to judges and other Magic mentors.

Some years and career moves later, D'Angelo found himself in a position to tap into his previous passion. D'Angelo and the Cryptic team put together a pitch to bring to Wizards of the Coast. Speaking with former brand manager (now VP, esports) Elaine Chase, a coworker back in his Wizards days, they worked out a visit to pitch the idea. Wizards of the Coast gets an absurd amount of pitches to use the IP for various products and games, and most of them get turned down. But once you know the experience Cryptic is trying to create, understanding why it got the green light is easy.

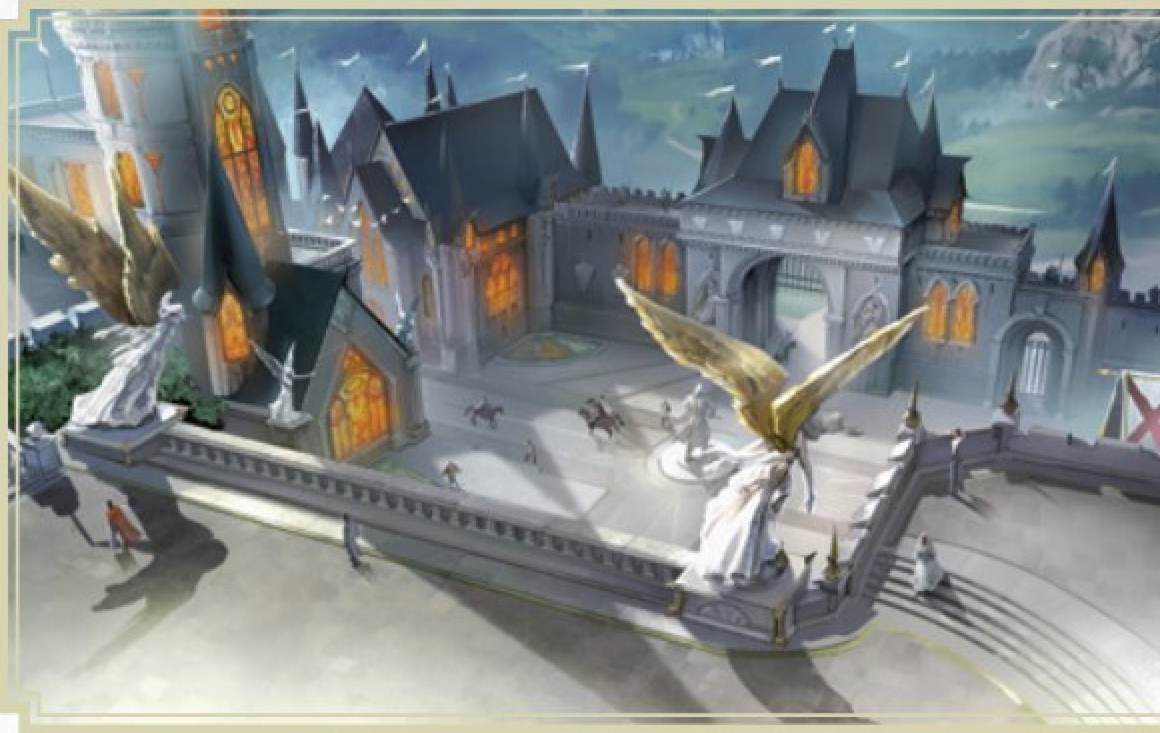
The idea behind Magic: Legends is to make a game that taps into the core of all that is Magic. It is an isometric action/RPG with fast-paced combat that brings players into the Magic universe like never before. Players summon creatures, develop a character through multiple progressions systems, and explore rich locations that have previously only been accessible through card art and text. An always-online world allows players to play content solo or with a group, creating a meeting point between familiar experiences like Diablo and Destiny.

"I finished up my pitch, and there was silence in the room; it was a really long-hanging silence," D'Angelo says. "And at the end of the silence, they said, 'Oh, my gosh, we want this game.'"

That, of course, was just the beginning. Team members at Cryptic then set out to create a master knowledge base for the Magic brand to steep themselves in – novels, cards, comics, art books, and more. Training sessions, daily games, drafts, and tournaments have been going on to get the team completely immersed in Magic as they craft a new world for planeswalkers to do battle.

Having consumed the many books and other sources of Magic information that have piled up over the years, D'Angelo also serves as the studio's loremaster, compiling summarized information and notes from vast amounts of research. "It does feel wonderful to come full circle with this IP – to have spent an early part of my life, 10 years of it, kind of really deeply entrenched in it, when I was just a fanboy," D'Angelo says. "Later in my career to have that opportunity to take something that I have been a fan of my whole life and truly bring that to life in a game is wonderful."

While D'Angelo helps the team determine if it's on the right track, Wizards of the Coast is also involved in the process. "We have creative freedoms," says executive producer Stephen Ricossa. "We go back and forth and collaborate, but Wizards [of the Coast] always provides a Northstar for us to follow." This goes as far as ensuring the design for characters feels authentic to making sure Legends stays in line with Wizards' future plans. "One of the things that I've really appreciated about the collaborative, written relationship that we've had with Cryptic is how receptive they've been to conversations about what Magic's future looks like," Turner says. "Because Magic has so much lore and history, it's been very easy to get caught up in those elements of Magic and prior storytelling. And so from my end, figuring out how to effectively communicate, 'This is where Magic is going,' and, 'Here is how you can add Magic Legends to be a part of that,' has been challenging, but more has me excited because seeing how Cryptic has taken those ideas and begun to run with them has been, honestly, hugely rewarding."



DELVING INTO DOMINARIA

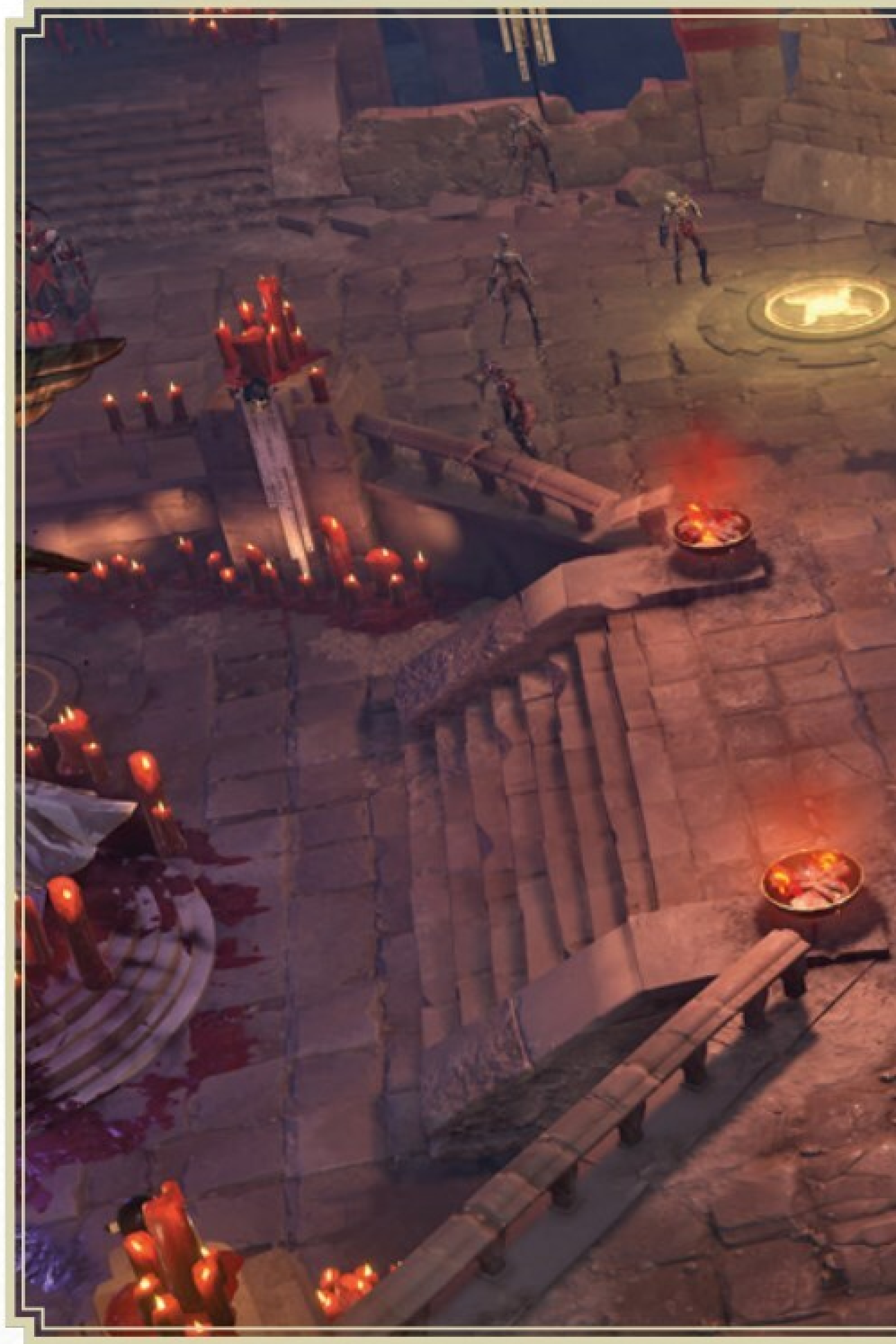
Magic: Legends takes place in the Magic multiverse and brings players to places they may have only seen as stray flavor text on a card, letting players interact with all manner of Magic heroes and villains. Cryptic Studios has worked tirelessly with Wizards of the Coast to make sure that every major beat happens within the context of the larger universe. On the non-glamorous and complicated side, this means a lot of back-and-forth over how certain characters like major planeswalkers can be utilized and if everything makes sense in the overall timeline and canon. On the flipside, the implications are exciting: Locations, characters, and even planeswalkers that Cryptic create become part of Magic's extensive lore.

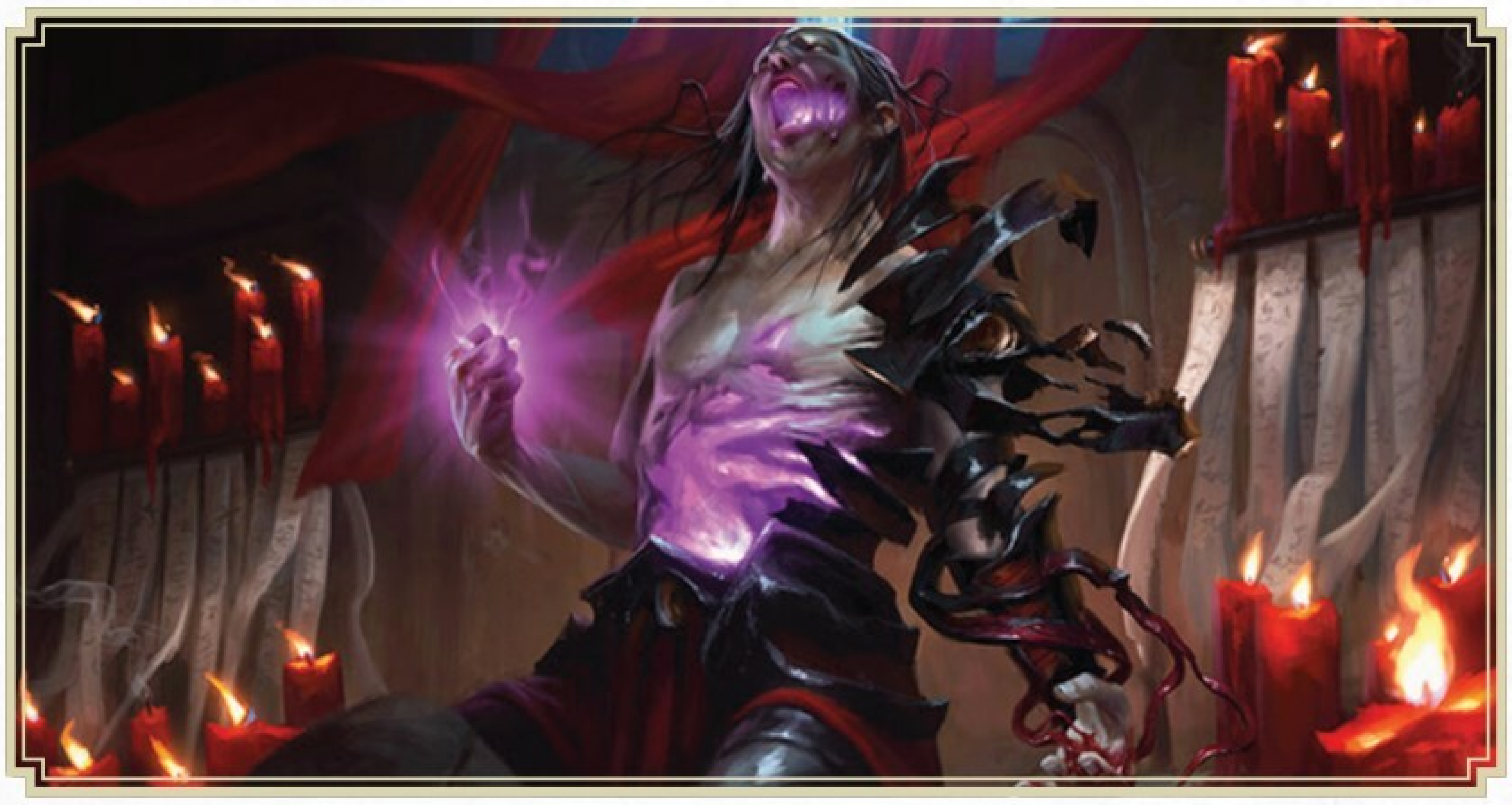
While the timeline may be slightly different from plane to plane as we explore them, everything in Magic: Legends takes place before the giant multiverse battle War of the Spark. For all practical purposes, Magic: Legends is the first time players actually get to see how the island of Shiv looks – and all the denizens that inhabit it, including everyone's favorite immortal goblin, Squee, and the dragon Darigaaz. "This is the first time they kind of get to step into that card frame and be in that place," Ricossa says. "There's been a lot of Magic games out there. But none of them really let you explore the locations of Magic or the people in the world of Magic. So outside of reading the novels, this the first time you're going to be seeing these locations and characters – kind of immersing yourself in this world." For some areas, like greater Benalia, there are tons of materials to draw upon, but when you dial down deep into specific locations, like constructing exactly how a journey through the Caligo Morass would look, it requires much more extrapolation from minimal source material.

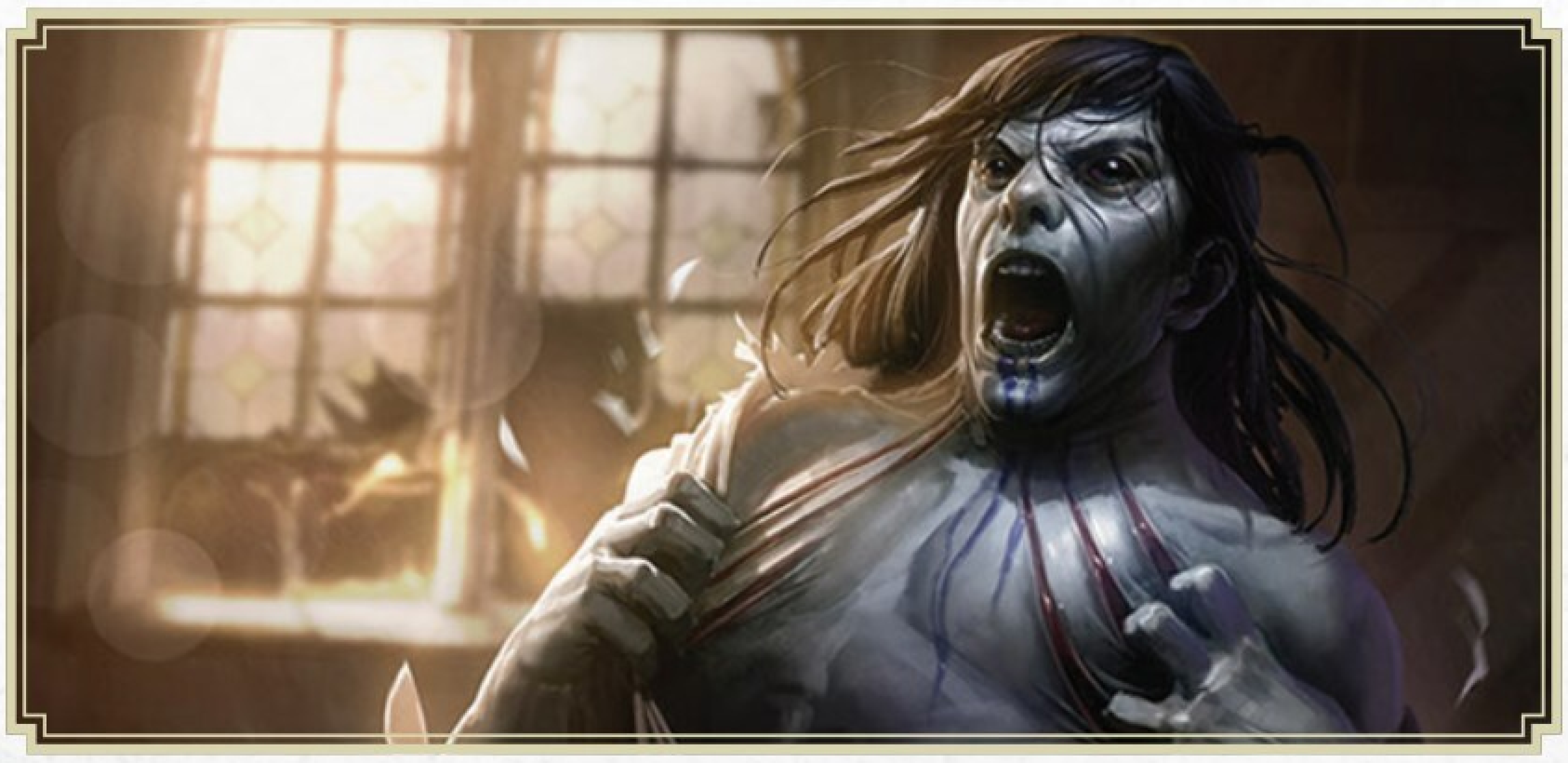
While players will eventually explore many planes in Magic: Legends, the entirety of our visit focused on the original plane and some of its many areas: Dominaria. Magic's primary plane for much of its first decade, Dominaria is a broad, multifaceted fantasy plane filled with diverse locations, creatures, and characters. It serves as the mainstay of all Magic up until the Mirrodin era. Specifically, our hands-on time took us to Benalia, with its many associated knights and heroes.

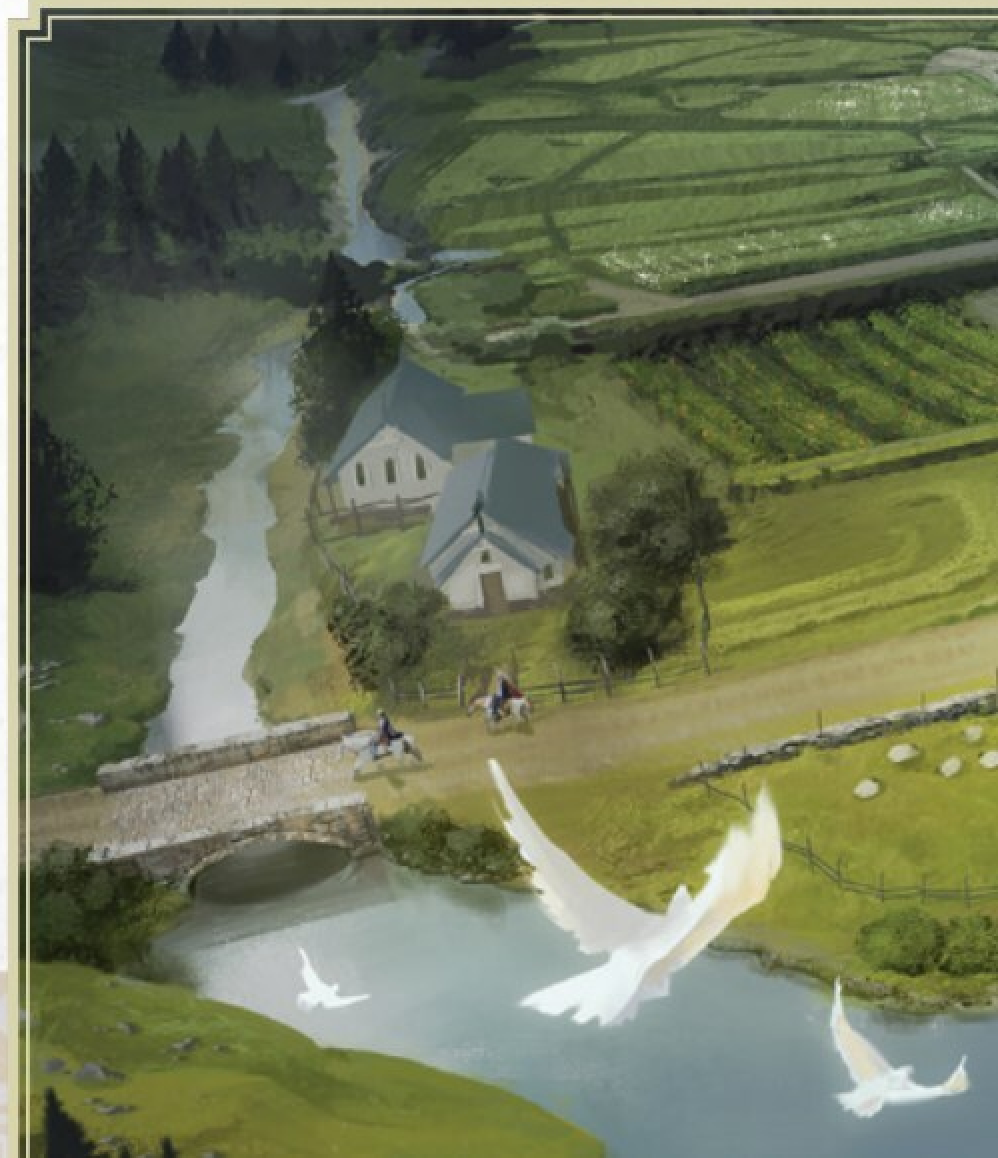
For those not familiar with the card game, Benalia and its followers are often associated with the color white, which is linked to order, justice, and creatures like soldiers, griffins, and clerics. It's important to note that while we're serving the "good guys" in this story by allying with Benalia, we may not always be siding with their philosophies. For instance, when we visit the island of Shiv (yes, where Shivan Dragons come from) that's rooted in red magic and all the anarchy and pandemonium that entails, a Benalish faction is actually our enemy in the story, with the concepts of order gone too far in a land that embraces chaos.

For our first hands-on session, we chart a course through Benalia and into the Caligo Morass, where the Cabal – a group of disciples, occultists, and other evildoers associated with black mana – has taken up residence. They're led by Josu







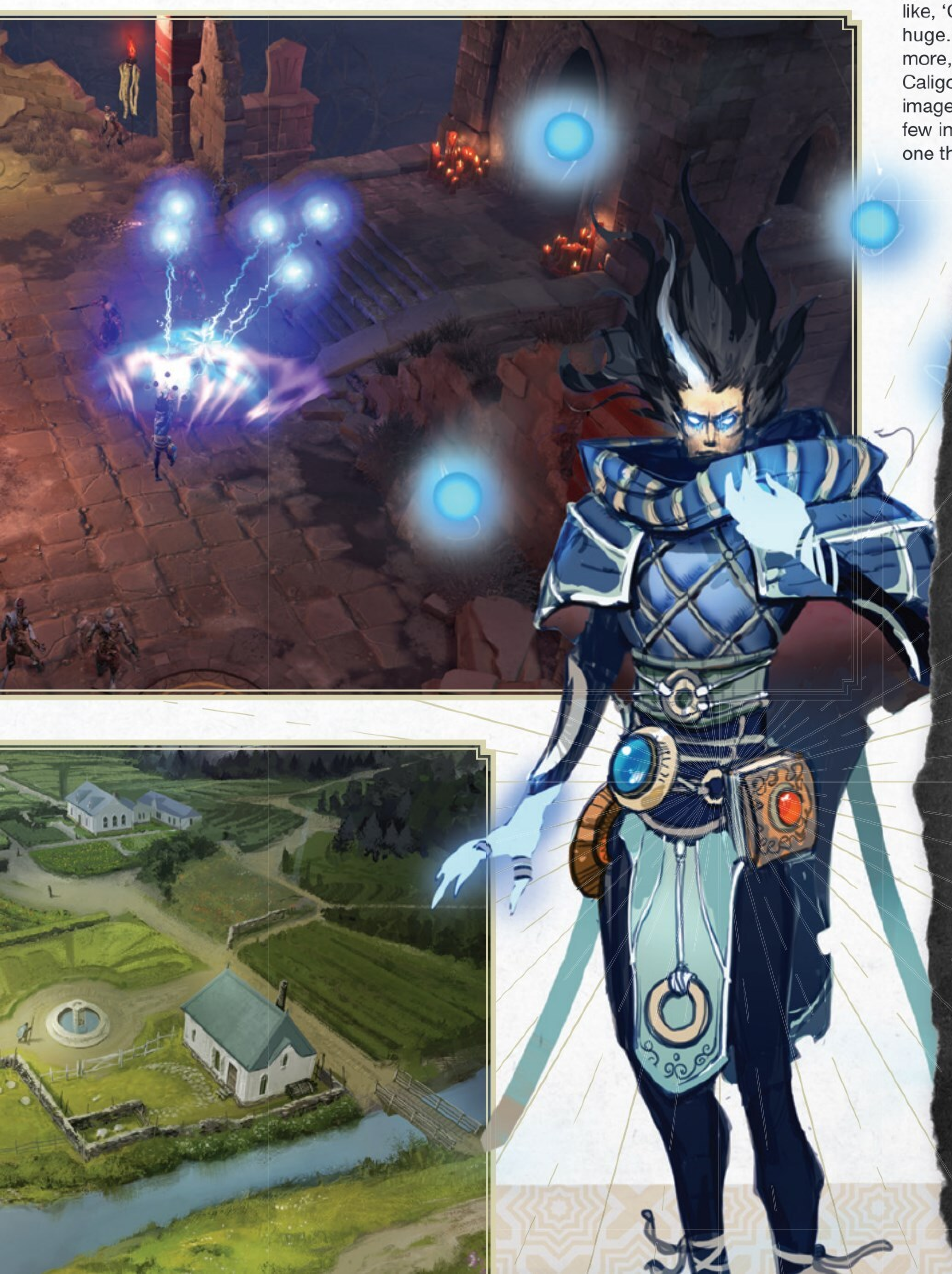


Vess, a powerful zombie and brother of planeswalker Liliana Vess, so we're setting off to stop them. Of course, before we can start monster mashing, we need to whip up a deck!

If you're afraid that Magic: Legends plays things too close to the card game and that you have to pore over decklists to find the right build, worry not. Decks are only 12 cards and constantly rotate during play – you will have 4 of your 12 spells "in hand" at any given time, with a new one taking an old one's place after you cast it. It's fast-paced gameplay that lets you create combos and builds, but you also don't need to worry too much about things like card draw or a mana curve. While you probably shouldn't stack your deck entirely of cards with huge casting costs, that might actually be an effective strategy if you're playing with a friend or two and dishing out nothing but big creatures or sweeping spells. You can freely mix and match two colors to create decks, so we were able to make classic archetypes just with the limited spells we had access to for the demo, like building a deck full of giant green creatures with buff spells, a red sorcery-centric deck ready to blast off with a bunch of damage spells, or black zombies and necromancy.

Your mana generates automatically during combat, and is proportional to the cards in your deck, meaning if you are playing with 11 green cards and 1 red card, you create a much greater amount of green mana so you can handily play whatever comes. There's also a limit of 12 "summon points" that you have to build your deck, with awesome and cool creatures generally taking up more of these points than generic soldiers. If you want to include big and terrifying baloths or massive elementals, you may have to make some tough choices for your traveling entourage. That said, the goal is to keep things as close to their card game counterparts as possible.

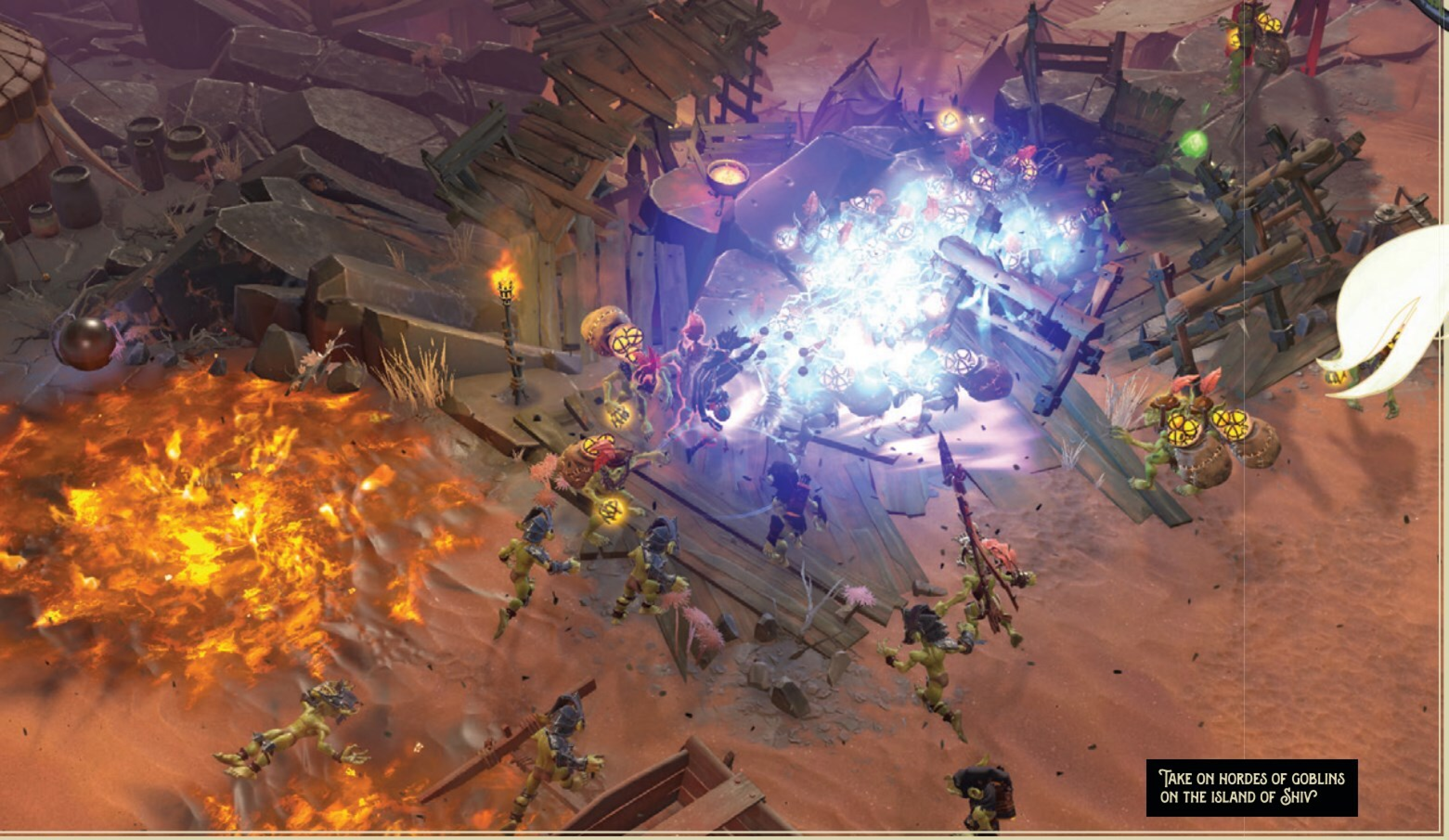
"We always want to make sure that we are staying true to the art of the game, so we're always pulling reference," says art director Barclay Chantel. "We have all their books, we have all the reference from Wizards of the Coast. Sometimes it's great because we have a crap ton to pull from. And sometimes we don't have a crap ton. Like maybe we have a few images. It's like, 'Oh yeah, finally! All of these areas are huge.' But when we start honing in one more, then one more, and now we're in Caligo Morass. It's like literally maybe two images of that. So we have to just use the few images that have been produced from one thing and start extrapolating on that."



The Most Dangerous Game

While we get plenty of time to tweak our decks and run some more missions with different card compositions, we also have the chance to dive into some brutal 1v1 PVP by queuing up at a battlemaster character in town. Until now, the abilities and spells that we've been playing with have only been examined in a PVE context, but these quick best-of-three duels quickly showcase that everything needs different consideration for PVP play.

The arenas are intentionally small to force the action, and new decisions come into play. Should you try to eliminate the opposing summons or just go for the enemy directly? The condition for victory is just to beat the enemy mage, but if you let summons stack up and grow they may become too much of a passive threat to handle. Many skills that are easy to use on herds of enemies become far trickier to land on an enemy trying to out-think you, and certain abilities – especially the Mind Mage's evasion skill, where they go invisible and leave a decoy behind – become much nastier deceptions to work around. It's fast, fluid, and challenging to balance, but it was a refreshing side snack to the main missions and ordeals. The team states there will be rewards and incentives for engaging in PVP.



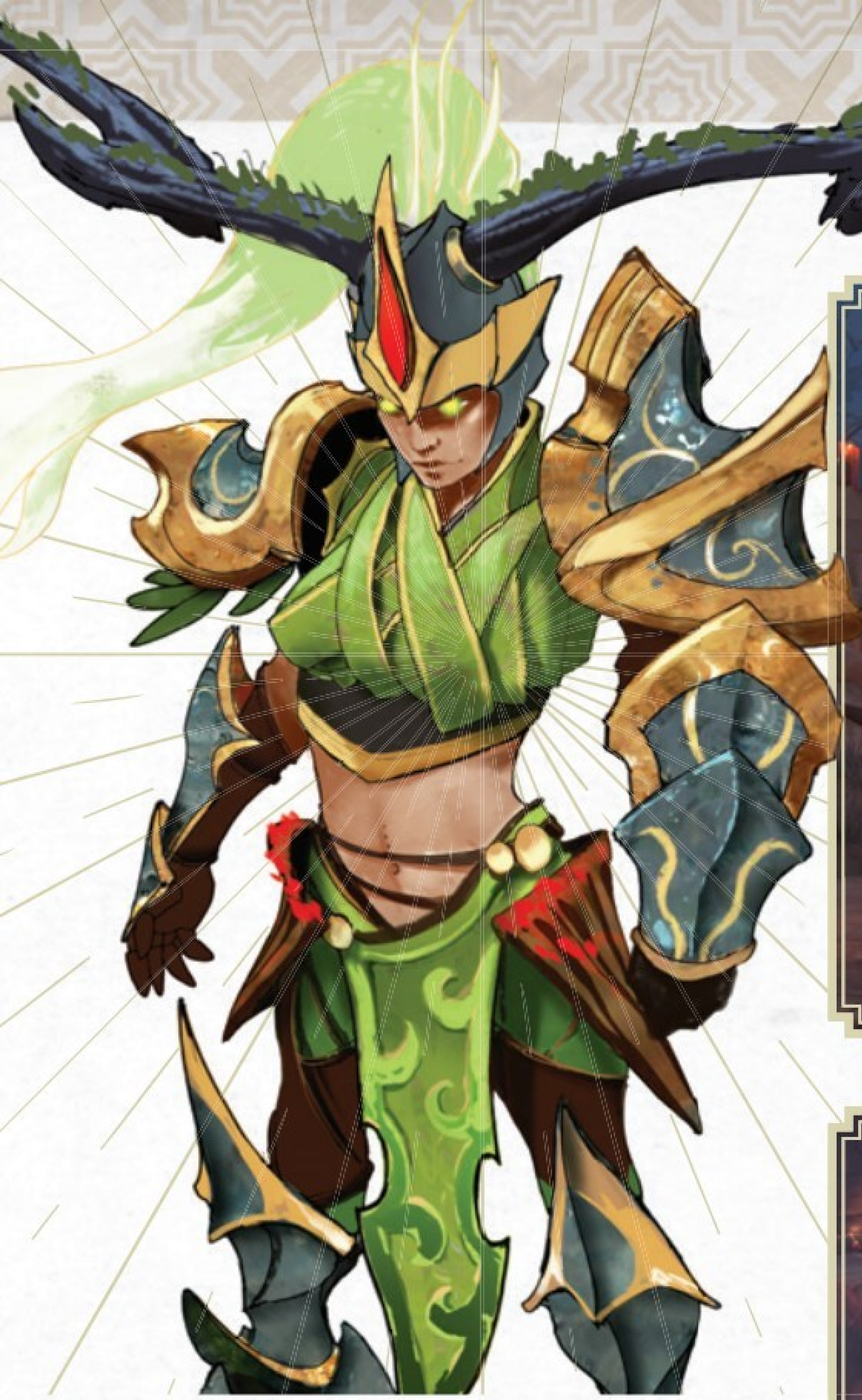
Take on hordes of goblins on the Island of Shiv

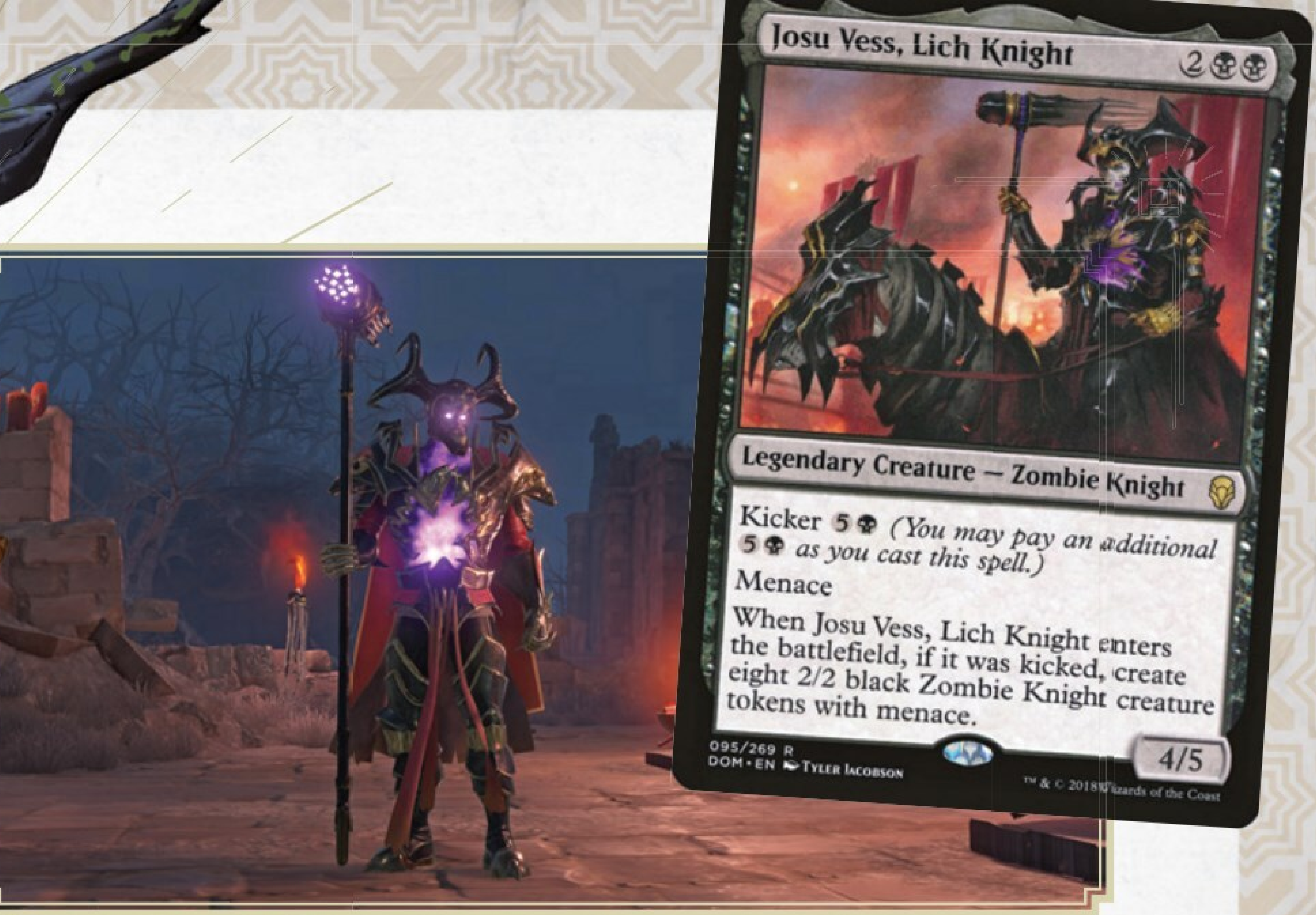
Of course, remaining true to the lore is only one slice of the color pie. The element of interpreting and staying true to the cards themselves is an entirely different beast, and the team takes it seriously. Beginning with basic cards like Lightning Bolt, the design and intent carry through to much more complicated cards. While they may not be direct translations, they're translations that make sense and retain the identity of their inspirations. In Magic: The Gathering, Lightning Bolt is a notable, powerful, and simple spell, offering a jolt of three damage for a single red mana. In Magic: Legends, the blast of lightning is a little more versatile, as it can hit more than one target, but the idea and spirit behind it remains rooted to its card form. Other cards like Josu Vess require a bit more work, turning his card art into a full-fledged character and then interpreting its abilities for the game.

"It's rarely going to be exact, A-to-A sorts of comparisons, but Josu Vess for instance, there's a kicker effect [where] you can spend extra mana and dump out a bunch of zombies," says principal lead designer Adam Hetenyi. "So that's a great mechanic for us to realize in an action/RPG. Anywhere we have opportunities where we can pull mechanics like that and really put them front and center, we will."

Magic is an interesting and challenging brand to bring into the action/RPG space, because although creatureless builds do exist, the draw for many players is summoning awesome creatures – turning many players into what would typically be reserved for a necromancer or summoner class. This is something Cryptic considered heavily as it determined to go with a traditional isometric action/RPG format over some of its already tried-and-true MMORPG designs. This way players can get a better overhead view of the action and the creature summons that are so important to Magic. "We went back and forth a couple of times on the type of game," Ricossa says. "We initially were like, 'Oh, we'll go with the kind of traditional MMO camera.' And then we were like, 'Maybe we'll do a third-person action game.' But because you're summoning so many things, and especially the exciting big monsters, you were looking at a lot of Earth Elemental butt and things like that, because you're running around trying to find dudes to fight."

Cryptic is still giving players tons of options for fluid play; even if they choose to go to a build that relies on summoning and buffing creatures, they're still going to be active in combat, performing actions with their chosen loadout. That's right, the deck is only the beginning, as picking your mage has other significant implications. During the demo, we got to play as both the Geomancer and Mind Mage class.





Josu Vess, Lich Knight 2●●

Legendary Creature — Zombie Knight

Kicker 5● *(You may pay an additional 5● as you cast this spell.)*

Menace

When Josu Vess, Lich Knight enters the battlefield, if it was kicked, create eight 2/2 black Zombie Knight creature tokens with menace.

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DOM • EN Tyler Jacobson
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The Geomancer draws from the color red's inspirations, with chunky gauntlets and an in-your-face playstyle, whereas the Mind Mage plays best at range, inside blue's intellectual bubble. It's important to note that your class selection has nothing to do with your deck, and you can swap them with the touch of a button while in town. Classes have passive boosts, like the Geomancer doing more sorcery damage and having more health. They also have traits, like the Geomancer's Heart of Iron, which lets them come back to life after being downed every few minutes.

After mastering/leveling up, these traits can be swapped from class to class to create a custom option. You have your basic attack, which is going to be a melee swing or combo on Geomancer, with a secondary attack that generally has a higher cooldown and does something that aligns with your class' overall strategy. For instance, the Geomancer commands a powerful point-blank area of effect as a secondary skill, and all classes also have a final third ability generally focused on mobility or survival, helping you get out of combat or move across the field efficiently.

In contrast, the Mind Mage has a ranged basic attack, bonuses to crowd-control effects, can lay out a cone of powerful stun with his secondary skill, and can even go invisible and leave a doppelganger behind to confuse opponents. So while you're constantly building up mana and summoning creatures to fire off spells, you still have plenty to do between casts. While we only saw these two classes during our time playing, it's a fairly safe assumption that the plan is to launch with five core classes, one syncing up with each of Magic's colors.

Before we head into the heart of the Cabal machine, we decide to kick things off by playing an ordeal. Ordeals are typically much smaller and faster to complete than the campaign missions, and feature more heavily gamified elements, such as knocking down a set number of objects to summon the boss, or completing a horde-mode-style event. In this mission, I have to basically trigger 4 different objects and then protect them over the course of around 10 minutes. If I don't succeed in getting all of them in time, I still get to fight a boss at the end and get loot, but it probably won't be as good.

The first thing you'll probably notice as you start killing cultists, zombies, and the giant Abyssal Fiends, is that unlike other action/RPGs, the ground isn't getting cluttered by weapons, armor, or other various color-coded item drops. Instead, there are health and mana orbs to collect that instantly replenish your associated bars and shard drops. Collecting these shards and other currencies from missions lets you level up cards – increasing their potency, duration, and other stats. For instance, your Scathe Zombies card may take 60 shards to go from level one to two, and it might increase their health, damage, and other abilities. So smashing every monster in sight, even if your mission points you to clear objectives, isn't a bad idea.

DANCING WITH THE DIRECTOR

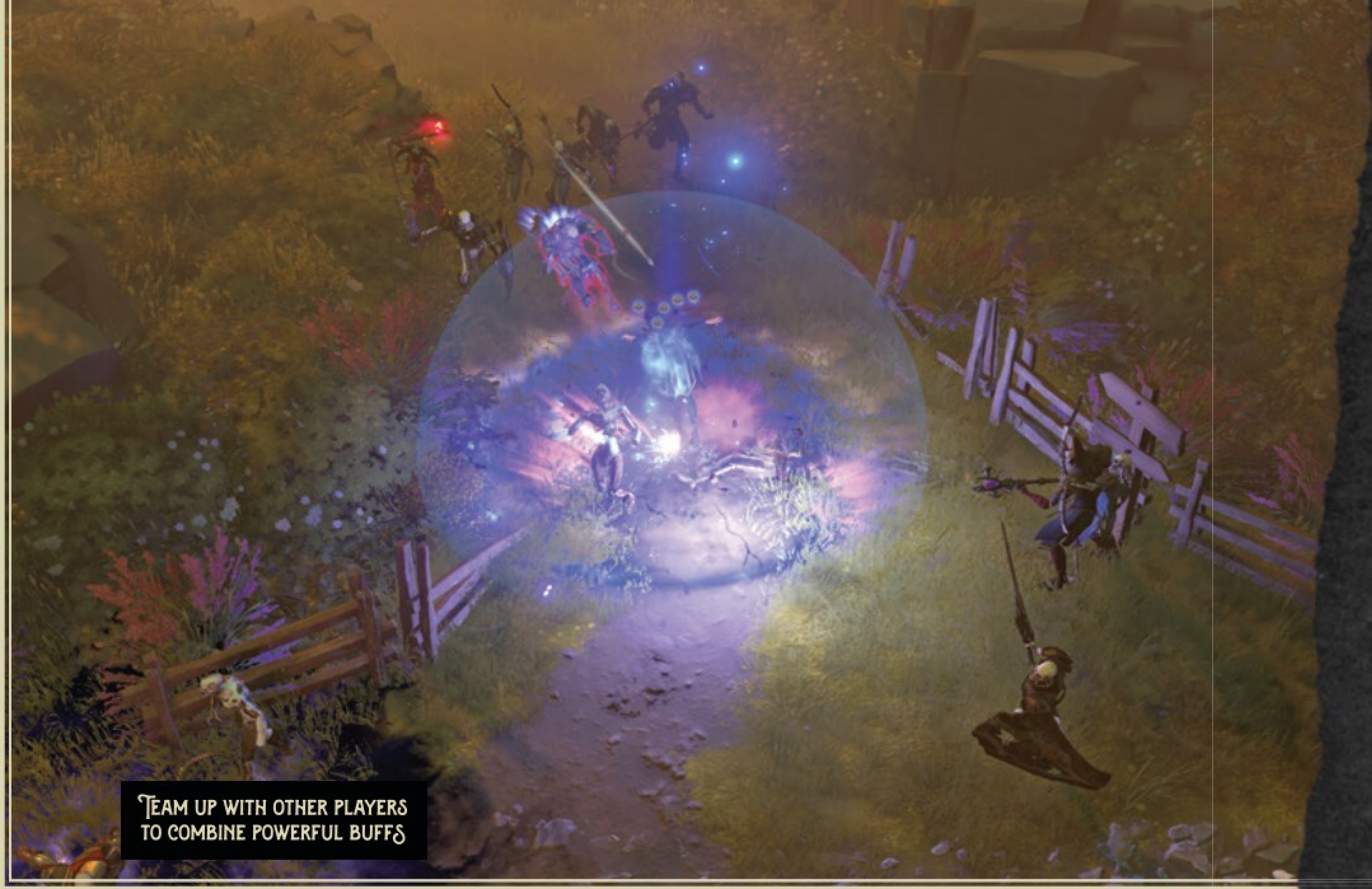
The action is fast and furious, and even though I'm sometimes waiting for my mana to build up to drop a big summon or spell, I have no trouble filling the gaps in the action using basic attacks, positioning myself out of harm's way, or setting up a larger play by gathering up a swarm to area-of-effect down. Watching Magic abilities play out on the screen as opposed to slinging cardboard is mesmerizing, as massive tidal waves wash enemies away and lava vortexes suck foes into a blistering whirlwind of destruction.

But as I carve a path through hordes of increasingly deadly enemies, I notice something: It's almost like the enemies are getting tougher as I get better at tearing them to shreds. More numerous and more dangerous foes seem to appear the more efficiently I destroy them. Something's definitely going on, and, as I'm soon going to discover, it's one of the more fascinating elements of the game. It's an A.I. system called The Director, and it makes decisions in real time, firing off tougher spawns and enemies to create intense experiences for the player with a natural-feeling ebb and flow. The Director decides that all my running around from objective to objective and AOE burst-down tactics have been a bit too much, so it spawns heftier foes to try and take me down. Luckily for me, that just translates into more loot.

Cryptic has learned a lot from its MMORPG stable, leading to the construction of The Director. Players would all too often have no reason to visit dungeons or older areas that may have been really cool and taken many resources to create, so one of The Director's goals is to make any zone interesting.

Unlike some other action/PRGs, maps are not procedurally generated; they're all hand-crafted, from the open-world areas to the instanced mission areas. However, much of the action you experience in a given level is automated to some degree. The Director is always watching you, letting you dial up the intensity with your actions until it reaches a threshold, where it then lets the action die down so you can rest and repair for the next challenge. This A.I. system monitors everything going on in the game and responds appropriately, attempting to create periods of rising and falling action that feel natural and keep the pace of the game perfect.

By using a wide variety of enemy spawn points, each time through a level is different thanks to the guiding hand of The Director. By editing the assortment of units that The Director can spawn in any



TEAM UP WITH OTHER PLAYERS TO COMBINE POWERFUL BUFFS

given area, Cryptic can make big changes with just a small tweak. If you're crushing everything in sight, The Director spawns powerful enemies like Abyssal Fiends to challenge you, perhaps even some giant monsters with additional skills or modifiers to really spice things up. On the other end of things, if you're struggling to maintain a foothold at all and getting really crushed, the director may amp things down a bit to give you a shot at survival. It's always best to keep things intense – you get way more loot by forcing The Director to throw those exotic spawns your way.

"Just randomly generating enemies isn't enough; we need to have some elements that paces out the content so that it creates a good experience with the player," says lead software engineer Daniel Razza. "We also want to create some memorable moments for the player. We want there to be that moment where a player plays a level in our game and it's the fifth time they play through, and an enemy spawns a powerful elite or miniboss in a spot that they'd never seen before. So we're going to create some of those interesting, exciting dynamic moments in gameplay."

The magical unit of measurement is called intensity, and there are all kinds of ways to get it. Players killing monsters amps up the intensity. Players taking damage ticks it up. The intensity score wants to naturally rise as more enemies spawn, eventually hitting a threshold where the intensity won't go any higher (and probably has a ton of nasty enemies on the screen to beat), and then things will taper off after that big battle. There are all kinds of other rules that are woven into the system, including rules for monsters that are only supposed to spawn once, monsters that hunt the player down, and more. It should be noted that The Director has to work with the player-selected difficulty, so tuning The Director to work with every situation is extremely challenging – but has huge potential rewards in creating engaging experiences for players.

"When we talk about intensity, it doesn't mean difficulty, but they are related," Razza says. "That's been a challenge for us to sort of get our head wrapped around a little bit. We need to be able to tune the intensity of a map or a specific encounter players facing so that they have a very intense experience without actually increasing the difficulty. And when we increase the difficulty, we might do other things where we change what enemies spawn or how high the intensity can get, or the power of the actual enemies themselves. But these are two very different metrics and, and getting them to work together is pretty tricky."

When The Director's working, it feels completely natural and organic, bringing you into the action and creating big battles and moments, and it's easily the most exciting aspect of the game from a behind-the-scenes perspective.

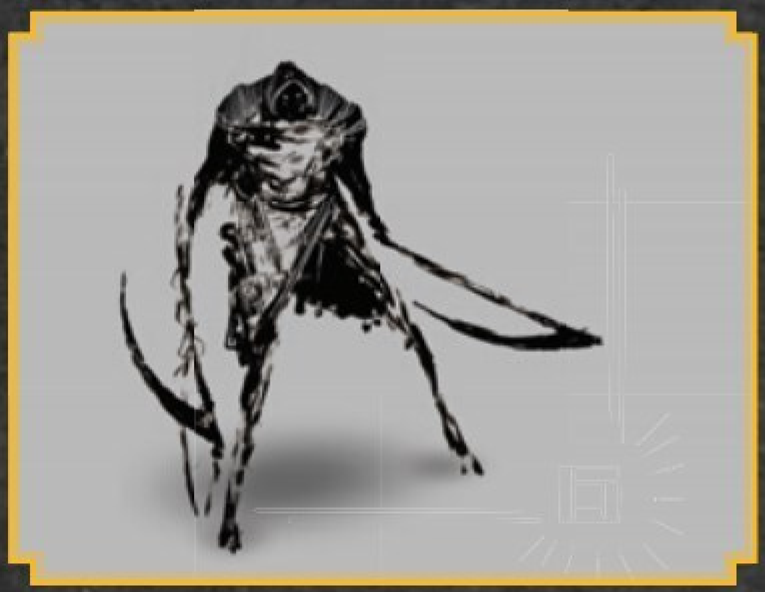
Eventually, I'm able to spawn the boss with about two minutes left on the clock, and he's no match for my army and spells – it's loot time! At the end of the ordeal, I get a nice end screen showcasing what new cards I've picked up, what shards I've acquired, and some other currencies that are probably used for some form of other end-game progression that I won't have access to during the demo. Playing with mouse and keyboard, the controls feel natural to anyone who's had any experience with point-and-click action/RPG games on PC, but I was also impressed with how the game plays on controller, allowing instant access to all my spells and abilities with ease. With the ordeal behind us, it's time to team up and tackle a different encounter.

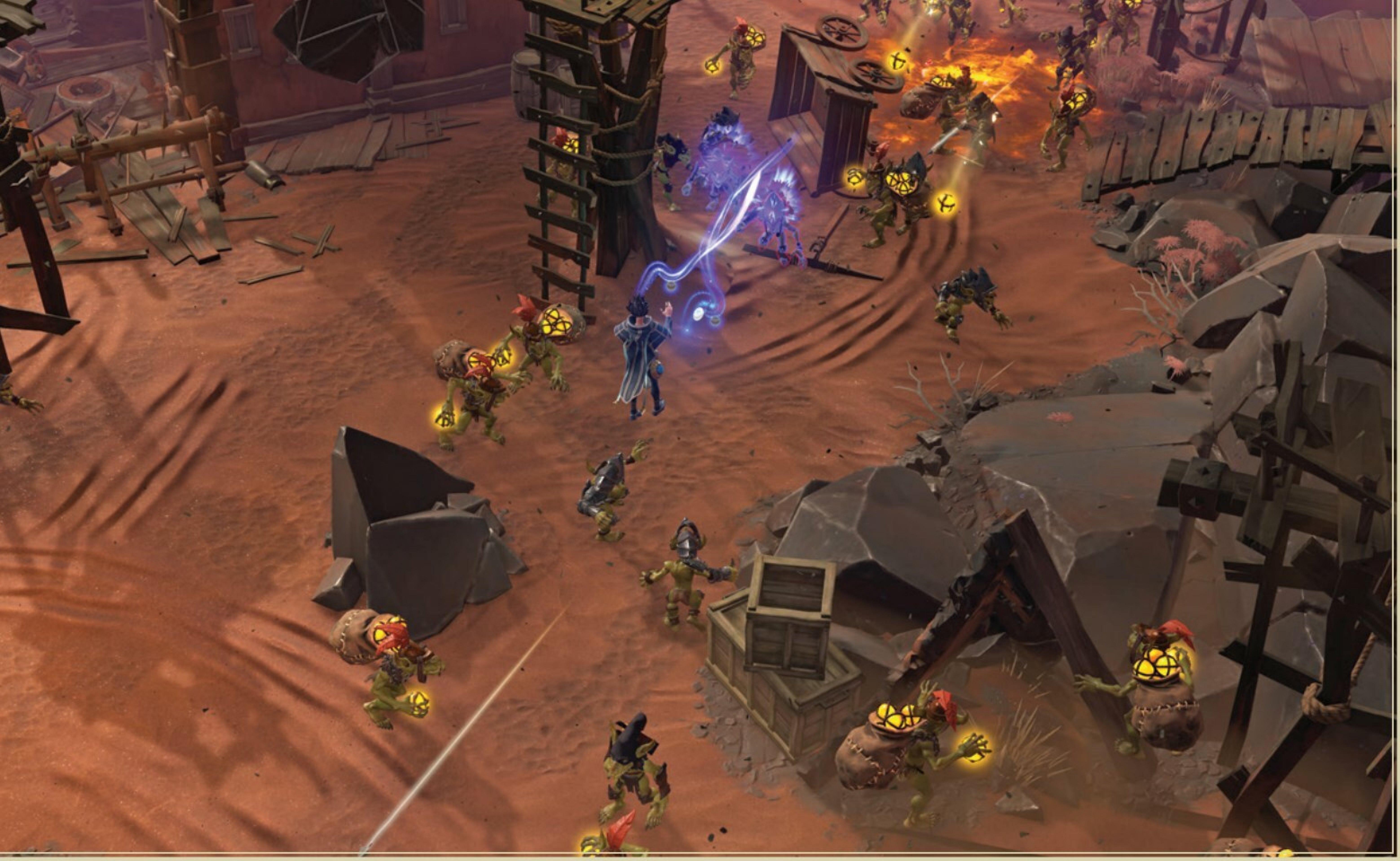
Designing a Duelist

During our visit to Cryptic Studios, we had the chance to build our own class to give us some perspective on the process at the concept and design level. Essentially, we came up with and selected various flavors and functions that sync up to create a class like the Geomancer or the Mind Mage. What we came up with is pretty awesome: a dark necromantic class that's ready to endure massive punishment while amping up a horde of minions.

- **Color/Planeswalker Inspiration:** Classic Black (Sacrifice, creature recursion, necromancy, death)
- **Basic Attack:** Melee
- **Weapon:** Dual Ethereal Scythes (This went from one big scythe to dual-wielding scythes to magical double scythes during the session)
- **Focus:** Survivability (Slow moving, lumbering, inevitable)
- **Primary Attack:** Multistrike
- **Secondary Attack:** Cone Execution (Cone-range skill that boosts your minions for enemies slain by this ability)
- **Utility Ability:** Sends scythes out and transports to the hook point.
- **Signature Spell:** Incremental Blight, Infest, etc. (Something that weakens but doesn't kill enemies so that you can use your secondary attack to clean up and buff your horde)

This classic spin on the Grim Reaper is slow, but highly durable, and all about stacking up a horde of smaller minions and maybe a few big ones to buff. Using its secondary attack, the class thrives by gathering up swarms of enemies and cleaning them all out in order to buff its own hordes. Instead of staying back out of the fray, a melee attack and high survivability allow the class to get right in the thick of combat – the perfect place to dish out some cone executions!





CRUSHING THE CABAL

Teaming up with my fellow *Game Informer* compatriots, I get a chance to check out how the game scales and plays in a group setting. It's a lot more fun than the solo experience; not only do we get to go from commanding a small squad of creatures to a veritable army, but we see how our spells can complement and buff each other. Buff spells work for the whole group, so if you have something that gives creatures +2/+2 for instance, it's going to make everything grow. Monsters get larger in proportion to their boosted stats, and watching something puny like a thrull get immense and take up a ton of screen real estate is as funny as it is functional. This particular thrull can pull enemies in with its tongue. It's super gross-looking, especially when king-sized, but I couldn't turn away. However, messing around with goofy giant-sizing is just a taste of what we're able to do in a group setting.

Other boons and healing magics also get more interesting when in a team, and we quickly dominate the trek through the swampy earth and cabalistic mansion. This is also the first time I experience how a lot of Magic's card rules have been translated into the game. Some aspects, like +1/+1 counters or lifelink, are easy to pull off. "Tapping down" a creature turns into a stun or crowd-control effect. Others are more challenging. A skill like trample, which would let damage go past a blocking creature's life total and carry over to the opponent, really can't be represented in an action/RPG setting, so trample just gets distilled into AOE damage, which makes sense given the context. Something like deathtouch, which would outright kill anything it touches in the card game, is switched to just doing big damage, another contextual consideration.

Some other features that carry over from the card game surprise me, such as the kicker keyword. Like in the card game, kicker allows you to pay more mana on a cast (by holding the button down, here) to achieve a more powerful result. Mechanics that don't necessarily have an easy-to-attach keyword from the game are present as well, like the concept of using a smaller summon as a sacrifice to bright out a more powerful creature. As we play in a group setting, The Director judges us as a group and attempts to create some serious challenges, but our decks work really well together. Somehow, we all took white magic for buffs, and that's turning our creature stack into a massive deathball that just gobbles up whatever appears on the screen. As we progress through the stage, we move from a dimly lit swamp area into a more elaborate Cabal complex.

We're not complaining, as combining our stuff together feels great, and the action is constant as we move from area to area, helping clerics take down magical walls, assisting NPCs, and moving through the area. Eventually, we get a shot to take on Josu Vess himself, where we have to do a little channeling inside a cathedral room to get him to come fight us. Fending off waves of creatures while we fill up a light bar is a breeze for our swarms of angels, griffins, and one very ugly, very giant thrull, and eventually Josu comes in to face us. The developers mention that creature-oriented builds are the bane of Josu, and they're not wrong; our swarms bury him quickly and open up our way to a loot cache filled with new card options and shards. The mission felt more interesting and action-packed as a team versus the solo experience. With cool ways to interact with each others' stables, I'm sure with a larger card pool, even more compelling combinations open up. This is definitely an experience that I'm eager to try out on a more challenging difficulty level.

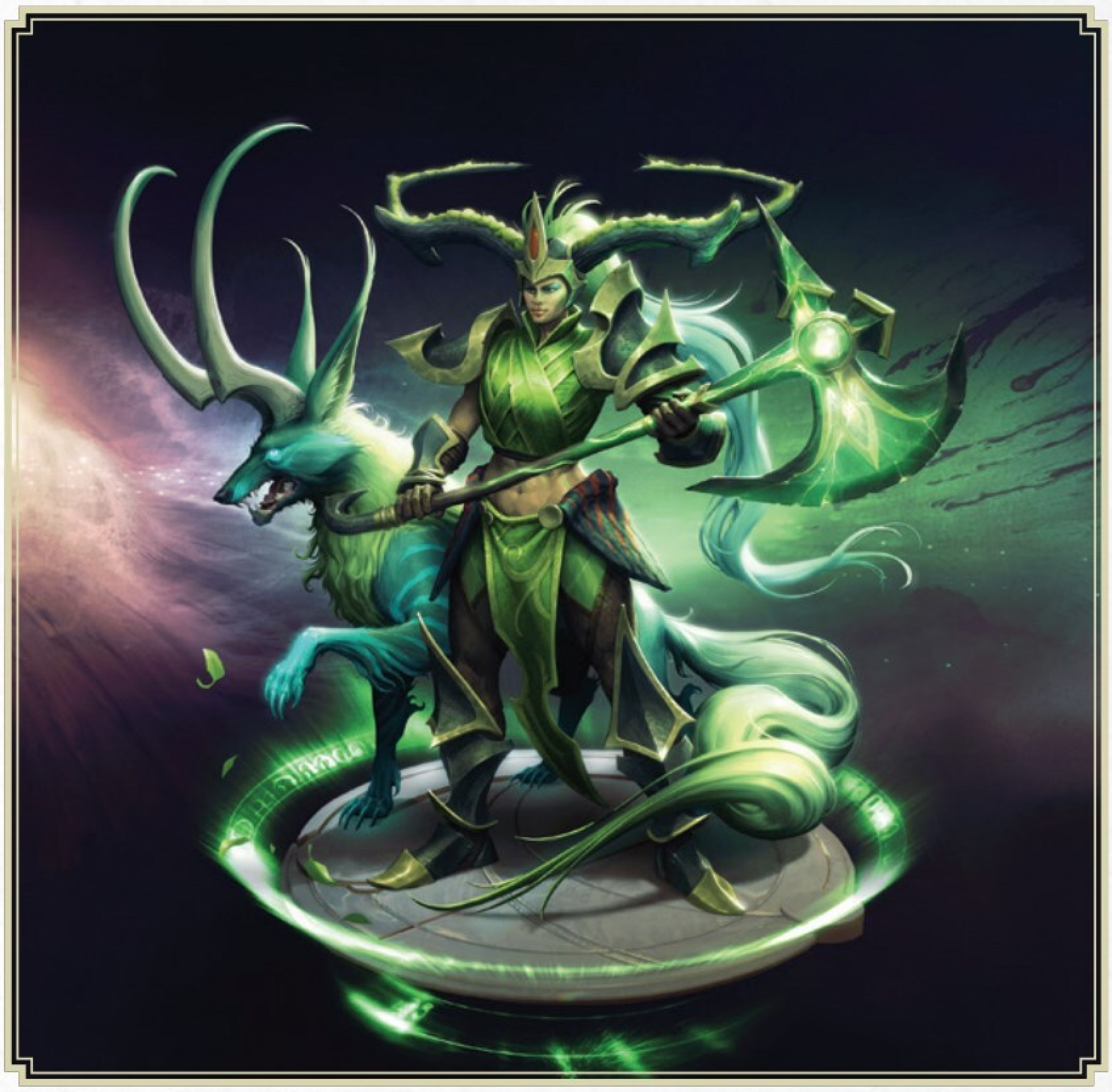
So far, we've only done missions, which are sort of instanced stages. Each larger slice of Dominaria features vast open-world areas as well, which we didn't get to play in, but we did get to see. Taking the camera for a zoom around Shiv, we see all manner of goblins, a Shivan Dragon, kavu, and more. The goblins and other factions here are being supplied with Benalish weapons and armor to serve some dark purpose, which is one story thread that players discover as they investigate the rough rocks and fiery depths of Shiv.

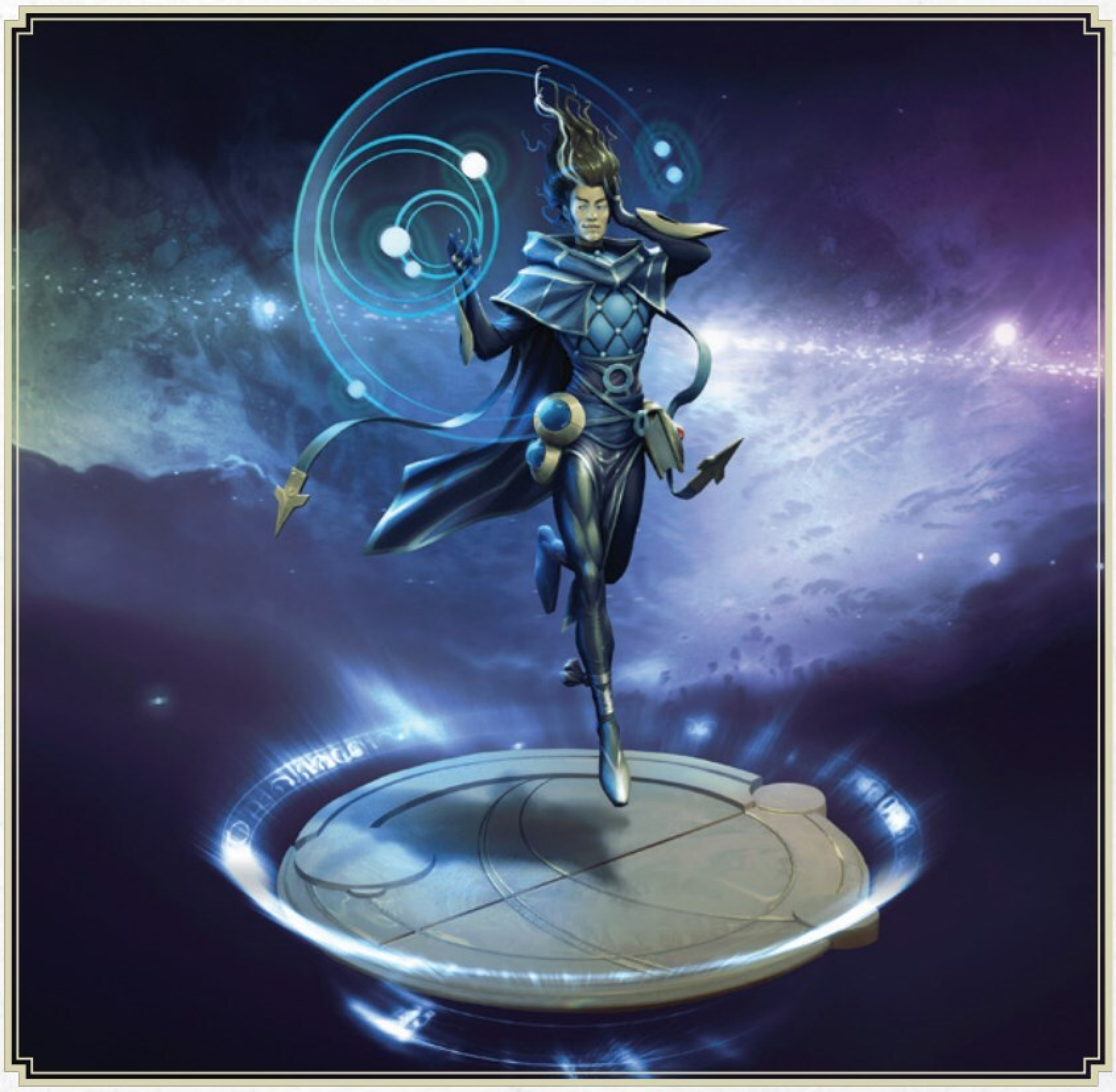
The open-world areas are absolutely huge, and players journey through them to discover story beats and missions. Once you find a mission area in the open world, you won't have to walk all the way back to do it again, since you can queue up for it from your town hub area. Wandering around the open world is also a great way to hunt down rare monsters or find events to participate in, which you can team up with other mages for. Each open-world segment supports up to three players, so while you won't be travelling in a giant pack to squash goblins underfoot, you can assemble a cozy collection of companions while you explore. As you travel across Dominaria, you're free to do the giant areas (like Benalia or Shiv) in virtually any order, picking and choosing your road to the end-game.

While it's unlikely that you'll just be able to whip out your credit card and purchase some Serra Angels or Snapcaster Mages, the game is going to embrace a free-to-play model, which includes some sort of trading element, even if it's not as simple as player-to-player card exchanges. We didn't get to see the monetization model, which can be a big element in free-to-play titles, but Cryptic did discuss how it's approaching this aspect. "We kind of want to learn from the successes that we've had from our previous games," Ricossa says. "But we also want to look at the modern landscape of free to play and see how things have shifted, because the last couple of years things have shifted rather dramatically. And so, we want to utilize the formula that we feel has worked really well for the studio, but also be aware of the changing tide within the industry as well."

For all the things we did see in Magic: Legends, we still have some big questions. We didn't get to see any of the end-game progression systems, of which we were assured there would be multiple types to explore. We didn't get to find out anything about artifacts, which are colorless cards in the core Magic game; they're in the game, but how they're implemented is not clear. And as we previously mentioned, we don't know how the free-to-play model will function. However, the core gameplay loop of summoning, casting, and looting seems incredibly promising, and somehow manages to adhere to the extensive source material. As a huge fan of Magic: The Gathering for decades and an action/RPG enthusiast, Cryptic has my attention heading into 2020. ◆

For more on Magic: Legends, visit us all month long at gameinformer.com/magiclegends, where we'll have exclusive gameplay, information, interviews, and more!





THE TOP

BY
GAME INFORMER
STAFF

50 GAMES OF 2019

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The countdown to the next generation of home systems has officially begun, but that didn't weaken the quality of video games released in 2019.

From stellar experiences in well-known franchises like Call of Duty and Kingdom Hearts to new and unexpected journeys like Disco Elysium, Observation, and The Outer Worlds, we had a hard time awarding our Game of the Year and specific genre accolades. But that's a great problem to have.

Meanwhile, ongoing services such as Fortnite and Overwatch continue to ascend, embodying the exploding popularity of gaming, from players to streamers to popular culture at large. Gaming's influence this year was so massive that events such as Blizzard's action against Hearthstone player Blitzchung (due to his solidarity with the Hong Kong protesters) and the continuing aggressive marketing of loot boxes made waves among politicians here and abroad.

This year will go down as another strong year for our favorite medium, and the following pages demonstrate why.

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SLAY THE SPIRE

January 23 | PS4, Switch, PC, Mac

Melding deck-building and roguelike elements may sound a bit strange, but developer Mega Crit Studios turns it into a magical medley that has players saying "just one more run" to test out new builds and to try to reach a higher floor. The battles are easy to pick up, but the depth takes time to learn and master, as one new card can set up a wealth of strategies to use against a boss that has been giving you fits. Slay the Spire is one of those unique successes that shows us there are plenty of great, untapped ideas out there for developers to dive into.

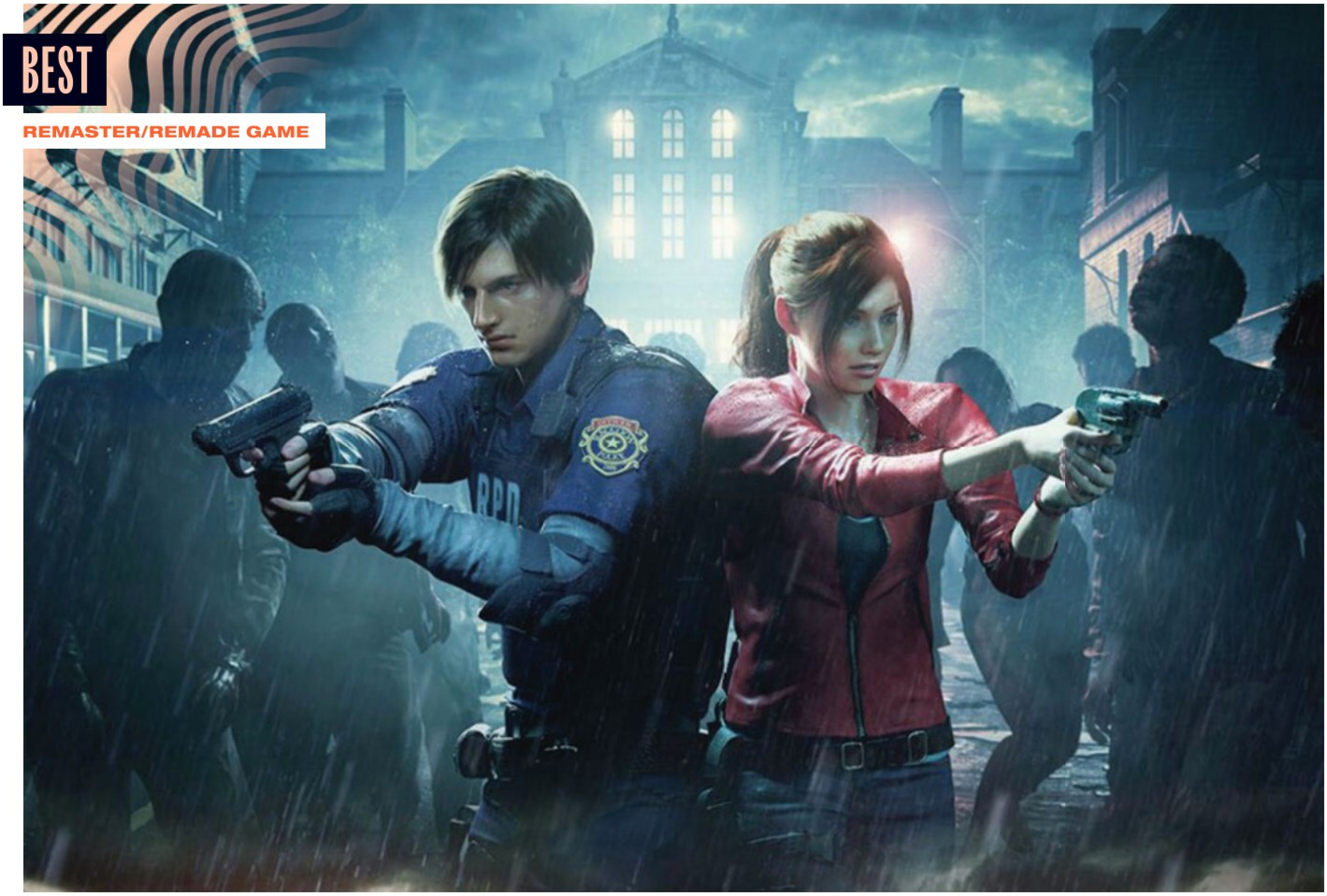
KINGDOM HEARTS III

January 25 | PS4, Xbox One

Worth the lengthy wait, Kingdom Hearts III takes Sora and company on a wonderful new journey through popular Disney worlds and into the heart of darkness where big revelations unfold. Keyblades are also put to good use to create high-flying hack-and-slash combat accented by colorful spells and cameos from some of Disney's beloved characters. This chapter offers just as much resolution as it does a launching pad for the series to continue in big ways.

BEST

REMASTER/REMADE GAME



RESIDENT EVIL 2

January 25 | PS4, Xbox One, PC

Die-hard Resident Evil fans expected a straightforward remake of the 1998 classic, but Capcom surprised them with a radically different retelling of this apocalyptic tale. It's darker in tone, the gunplay is tighter, the puzzles more realistic, and the haunting footsteps of Mr. X make it far more terrifying. Capcom has experimented with this series over the years, and Resident Evil 2 feels like the perfect blueprint for the future.

SUNLESS SKIES

January 31 | PC

This standalone successor to Sunless Sea offers the perfect blend of RPG character growth, morally gray decision-making, and airship combat across a vast Victorian-themed skyscape. Heavily flavored by Gothic and Lovecraftian horror tones, Failbetter Games crafted an intriguing adventure filled with dark choices and fascinating discoveries. For one of the most emergent and creative story experiences of the year, you can't go wrong here – just don't blame us for the inevitable nightmares.

TURN 12
RAGNA
MERCIA

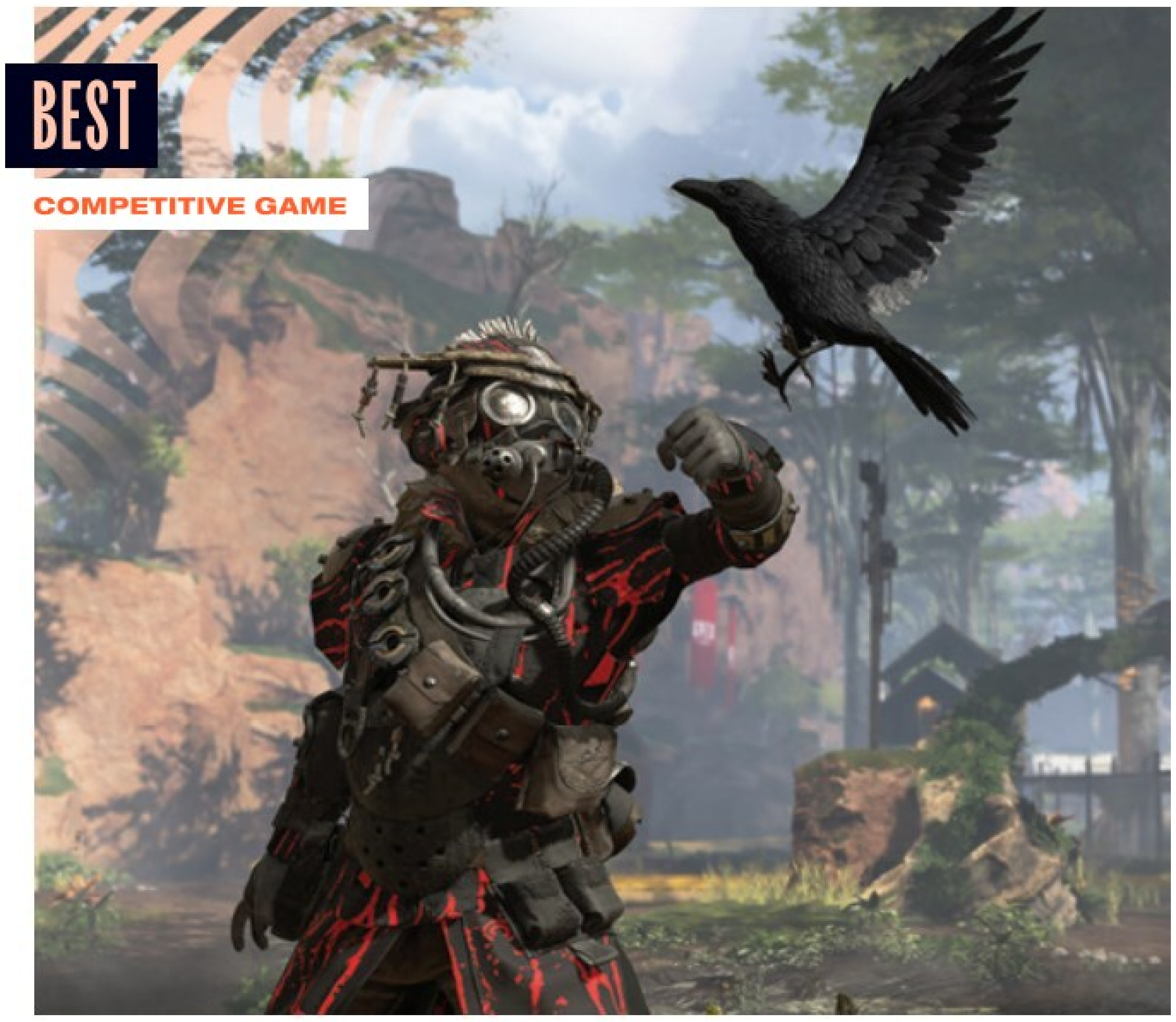
WARGROOVE

February 1 | PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC

Nuanced turn-based tactics don't get much better or more challenging than those in Wargroove's beautifully designed battles. While wearing inspiration from Nintendo's Advance Wars series on its sleeve, developer Chucklefish creates separation with a heartfelt story, unique groove abilities that shake up the battles in unexpected ways, and immense amounts of content, including maps, modes, and fun multiplayer variations.

BEST

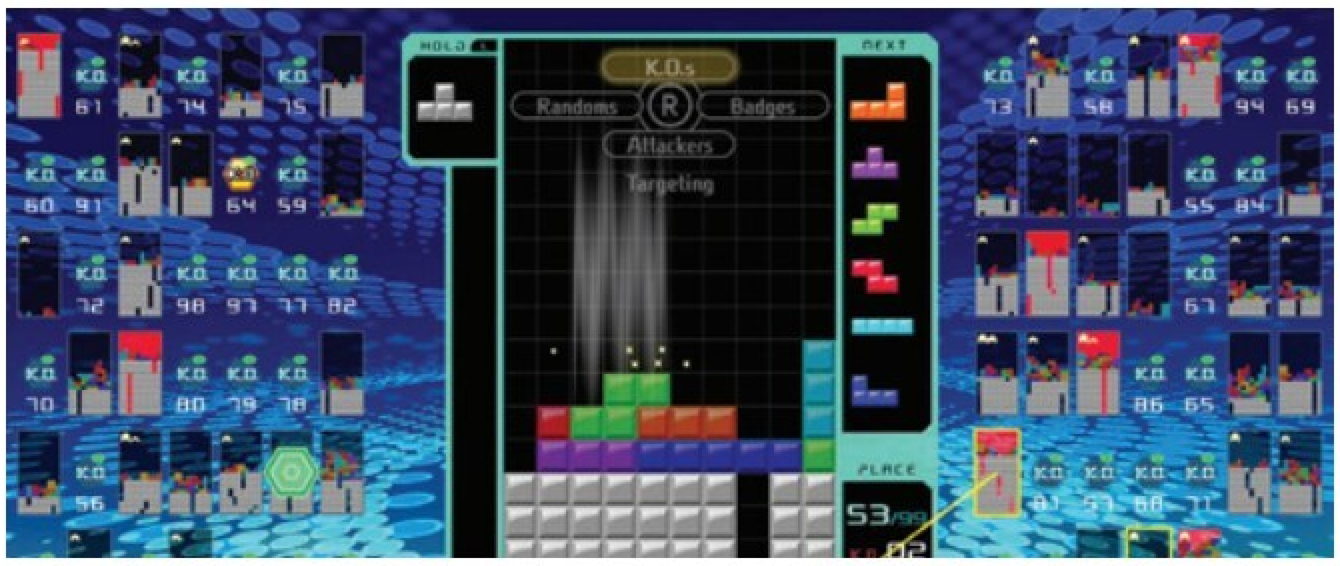
COMPETITIVE GAME



APEX LEGENDS

February 4 | PS4, Xbox One, PC

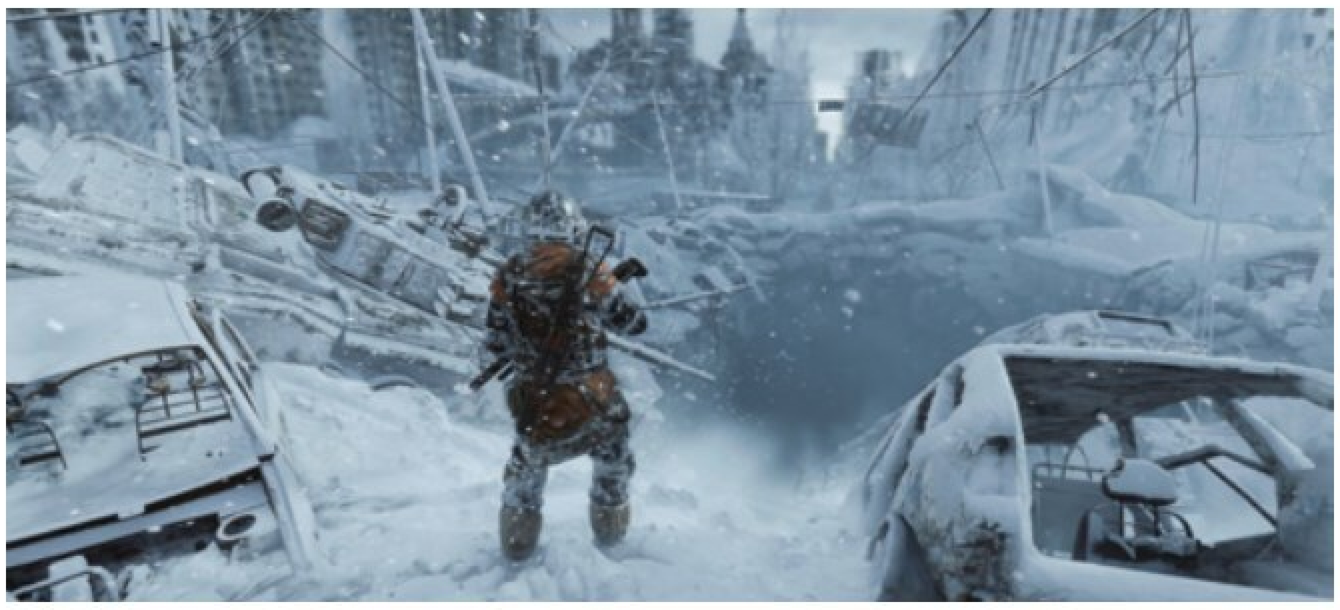
After Titanfall 2's release, many wondered what Vince Zampella's team had next. While some would've started from scratch, Respawn took the highs of the criminally underrated series and formed a contemporary shooter that, even just for a moment, did what others couldn't: dethrone Fortnite. Through additions of the ping system, memorable characters, and streamlined looting mechanics, Apex Legends stands out in a crowded genre, and delivers a thrilling battle royale.



TETRIS 99

February 13 | Switch

If you'd told us in 2018 that one of the best battle-royale titles of the next year would be Tetris, we would've chuckled. Yet here we are, and Tetris 99 still has its hooks in us. Developer Akira's ability to retain the core of the classic game while naturally adding battle-royale elements has made for some of the most intense multiplayer experiences this year. With the addition of customization options, challenges, and events, Tetris 99 will have legs long after the book is shut on 2019.



METRO EXODUS

February 15 | PS4, Xbox One, Stadia, PC

Emerging from the dimly lit underground into bright, frozen areas gives Metro Exodus a much needed change of scenery. Developer 4A Games has fun with the new setting, giving players plenty of mysteries to unearth and new adversaries to deal with. This isn't a game to play for the story, but the flow of action, surprises along the way, and stunning visuals more than make up for its oddly silent protagonist.

TOP TEN

HEADLINES

1

The Hong Kong Protests Fallout

Blizzard's clampdown on Hearthstone player Blitzchung's support of the protests in Hong Kong against the Chinese government kicks off a backlash against Blizzard and prompts questions about the messy intersection of games and capitalism.

2

Stadia's Streaming Stalls

Google's Stadia looked like it could kick off a new era for streaming gaming, but poor performance and delayed features has put the future on hold.

3

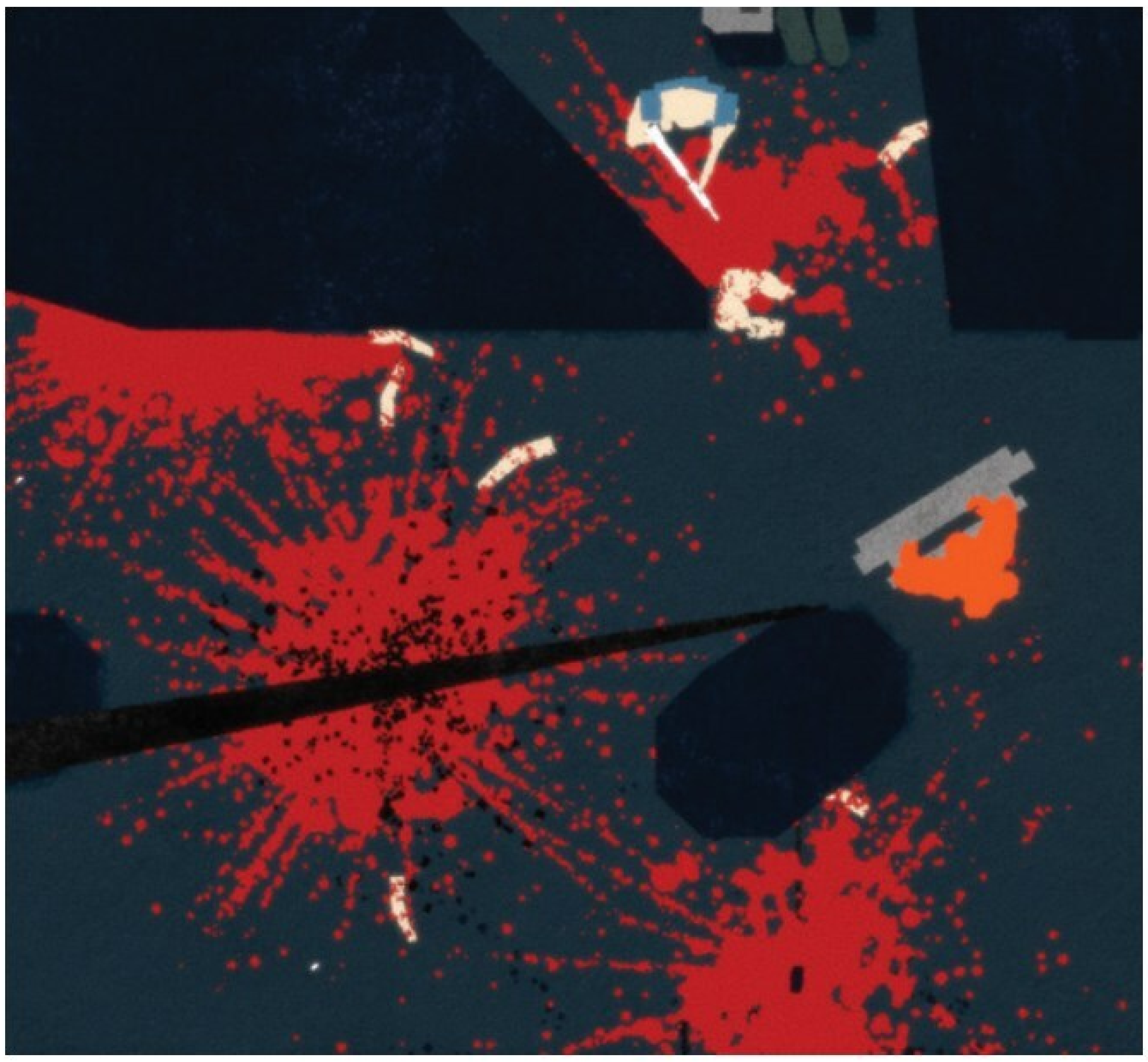
Live Service Hiccups

EA's Anthem (shown) and Bethesda's Fallout 76 stumble as services. Anthem was poorly supported from launch, and Fallout 76 favored real-money spenders, among other problems.

4

The Fortnite Black Hole

Fortnite's season 10 ended with a black hole that sucked up the game's entire map, taking it offline temporarily. Players were on edge, not knowing what to expect, proving the game still has everyone's attention.



APE OUT

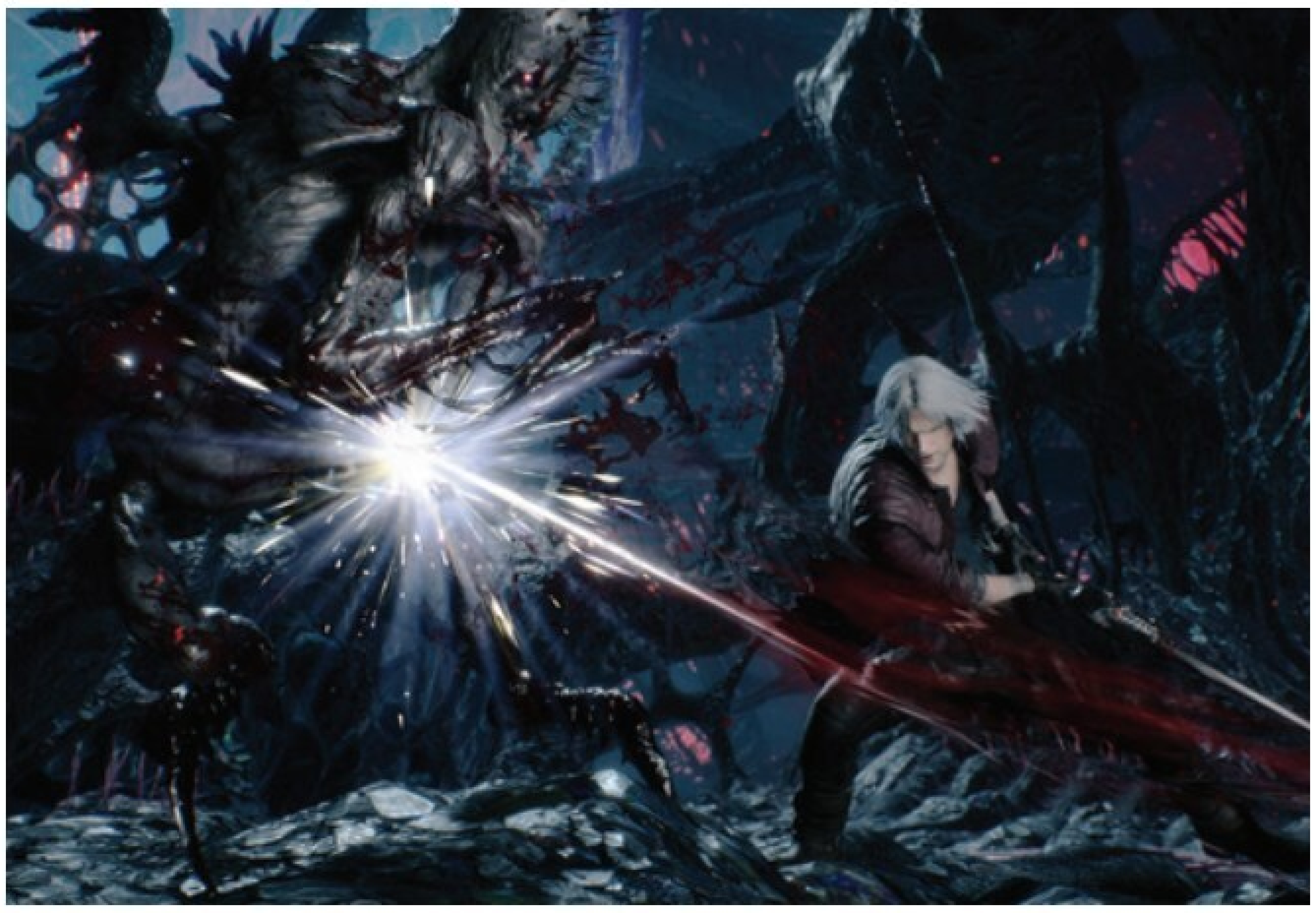
February 28 | Switch, PC

You are a massive gorilla captured and held against its will. Naturally, this makes you angry. Very angry! The second you escape, heads begin to roll. Ape Out's minimalist art design and jazzy, drum-heavy soundtrack are mesmerizing. Tossing enemies across the room and watching them smear across walls is both brutal and beautiful. Ape Out gives players a chance to act out their base animal instincts in a way that couldn't be more satisfying.

DEVIL MAY CRY 5

March 8 | PS4, Xbox One, PC

If you love stylish action, then you can't go wrong with Devil May Cry 5. After a decade-long break, Capcom continues the story from Devil May Cry 4 and brings back Dante, Nero, and several other familiar faces. A new character (named V) provides a demon-summoning alternative to the usual swords-and-guns approach. Regardless of who you're controlling, the array of cool weapons, killer moves, and grotesque foes keeps the action intense.



5

Loot Box Legislation

Gamers continue to be wary of loot boxes and their potential to foster pay-to-win, disrupt game design, and potentially prey on kids. Loot-box investigations and legislation were initiated worldwide (including the U.S.) to address the issue.

6

Epic Store Exclusivity

The Epic Game Store's challenge to the PC sales hegemony of Valve's Steam angers gamers due to Epic's aggressive brokering exclusivity windows similar to those on the home consoles.

7

Changes at the Top

Nintendo president and COO Reggie Fils-Aimé (shown) and Sony chairman Kaz Hirai both retired, signaling a clear changing of the guard. Also, Sony Worldwide studio exec Shuhei Yoshida moved to a new role within Sony.

8

Video Game Violence

Threats of violence became a bad trend, from threats to the Square Enix and Twitch headquarters, to the harassing of devs online and beyond. The debate over violent video games also surfaced after two mass shootings in one weekend.

9

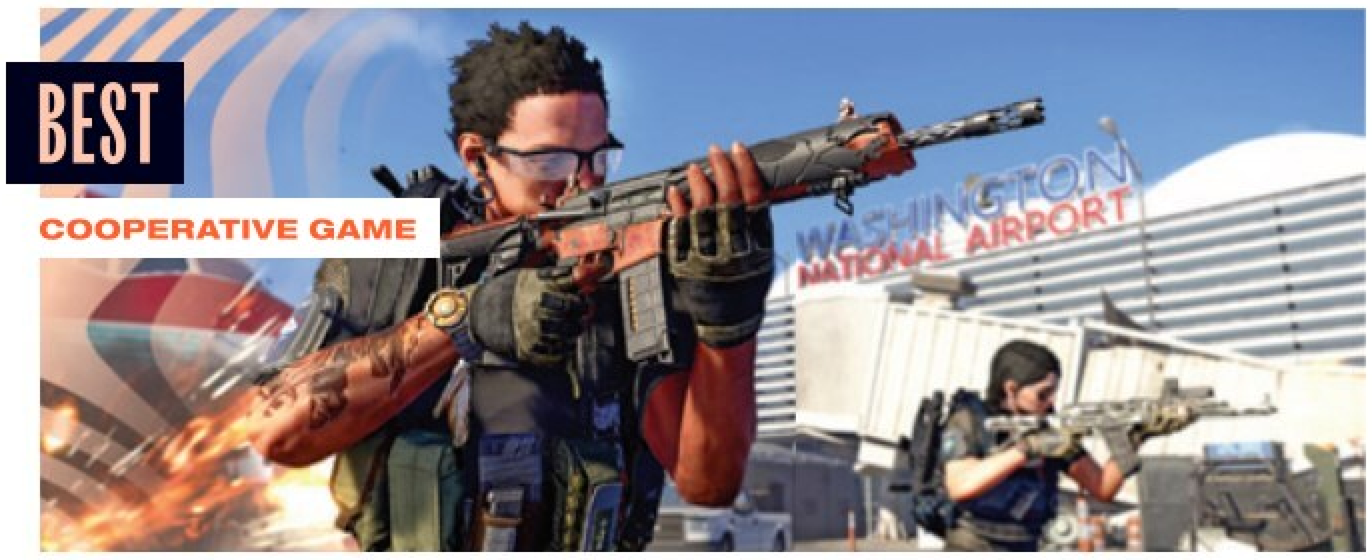
Streaming Influence

High-profile influencers such as Ninja (shown) and Shroud left Twitch for the likes of Mixer, taking millions of followers and sponsorships with them, signaling the continued power of the streaming space.

10

Half-Life Returns ... Sort of

Gamers have been waiting for the return of Half-Life, and Valve has responded with Half-Life: Alyx. The problem is it's a VR title – not exactly the vision of the future fans were hoping for.



THE DIVISION 2

March 15 | PS4, Xbox One, PC

Living games are hard. But with its sophomore effort in The Division series, Ubisoft shows its mettle and proves that you don't need years of post-launch support before a game can be technically solid, engaging for time investment, and most of all, fun. A thoughtfully crafted post-apocalyptic Washington, D.C. makes for a gorgeous setting, and fun customization accompanies the excellent third-person shooting to rocket The Division 2 into relevancy.

SEKIRO: SHADOWS DIE TWICE

March 22 | PS4, Xbox One, PC

From Software continues to tinker and innovate with the action formula that brought it into the limelight, and Sekiro presents a challenging, wondrous dive into a surreal shinobi story. Difficult and testing, Sekiro may shatter you into nothingness before sculpting you into a beast ready to handle any incoming blow with a perfectly timed deflection. As always, the journey is worth the hardship, pitting the player against fantastic bosses and creative environments.

BEST
ACTION GAME

BEST
SONY EXCLUSIVE

DREAMS

April 16 | PS4

Part of Media Molecule's identity as a studio is creating tools that make game development accessible to the masses. Dreams is the ultimate expression of that goal, with a suite of ambitious and intuitive options that let your creativity run wild. But if you'd rather play games than make them, Dreams also acts as an amazing experimental platform by providing a seemingly infinite well of community creations.

BEST
FIGHTING GAME

MORTAL KOMBAT 11

April 23 | PS4, Xbox One, Switch, Stadia, PC

The crunching of bones continues to deliver a siren-like melody for gamers. NetherRealm has been locked in Mortal Kombat's bloody dance for decades now, and the battles continue to improve, both in big and small ways. Even though the characters are immediately recognizable, the combat changes make Mortal Kombat 11 feel like a new experience, the hallmark of a great sequel. It has some loot issues, but playing dress up with Scorpion is good fun, and the unlockables are nearly endless, meaning this is a game you can (and should) keep playing.

DAYS GONE

April 26 | PS4

Sony Bend proves that the zombie genre still has some mileage left. Days Gone drops you into an incredibly hostile world, where death is one misstep away. The confident storytelling and open-world exploration lead you down a precarious path where you have to learn from every failure. Once you settle into its rhythms, Days Gone delivers a sad and lonely adventure filled with characters who are struggling to connect in some of the worst possible circumstances.

OBSERVATION

May 21 | PS4, PC

Observation's story has echoes of Stanley Kubrick's 2001: *A Space Odyssey*, and the game does a masterful job creating suspense to keep players on the edge of their seats as they explore the mysteries surrounding a derelict space station. Observation also shines in the visual design and gameplay of its puzzles, furthering your immersion in the thrilling tension unfolding in the depths of space.

TOTAL WAR: THREE KINGDOMS

May 23 | PC

With the series' continuous evolution, this year's Total War chooses to not only change the battlefield, but how players experience the conflicts of the Han dynasty. Utilizing the Romance mode, the choice to emphasize the mythical heroes and their individual battles gives the game a feeling of fantasy in lieu of the more historically accurate skirmishes of the past. While that may turn some hardcore history fans off, the beauty of Three Kingdoms lies in its ability to appeal to a wider audience without sacrificing what made the series a strategy staple.

OUTER WILDS

May 29 | PS4, Xbox One, PC

The charm of the Outer Wilds isn't just its look or the fact that your astronaut can travel to different worlds, it's the sense of discovery in exploring a planet, for example, and finding a sphere that teleports you across the universe – even if it is to your death. The gameplay is rough around the edges, but the way your actions nestle into the larger puzzle structure of the game's 22-minute loop makes Outer Wilds a special adventure.

PERSONA Q2: NEW CINEMA LABYRINTH

June 4 | 3DS

The second entry in the Persona/Etrian Odyssey crossover series provides another entertaining-but-challenging dungeon crawler. For this adventure, the Persona 5 cast goes to the movies, exploring dungeons with cinema themes and tropes, from superheroes to sci-fi. Persona's intricate combat and fusion systems shine with Etrian Odyssey's punishing FOEs and labyrinthine dungeons, and the social system helps forge a deeper connection with the characters. It's a fitting series tribute and worthy last hurrah for the 3DS.

TOP TEN
MOMENTS

1

The Ashtray Maze
(Control)

In a game full of mind-bending moments, nothing stuck with us like this intense sequence set in a series of morphing rooms, complete with an out-of-nowhere metal soundtrack.

2

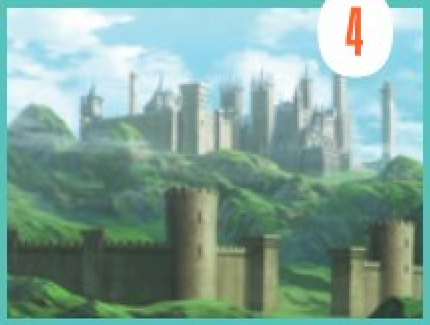
Karaoke
(Disco Elysium)

After picking a sad song to perform in front of a crowd, you learn more about who your character is through a performance that's either a stunning success or a spectacular failure.

3

The Guardian Ape
(Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice)

This formidable foe has one last trick up its sleeve when you think you've finally gotten the upper hand. It's a twist nobody sees coming, and one that became fodder for reaction videos.



4

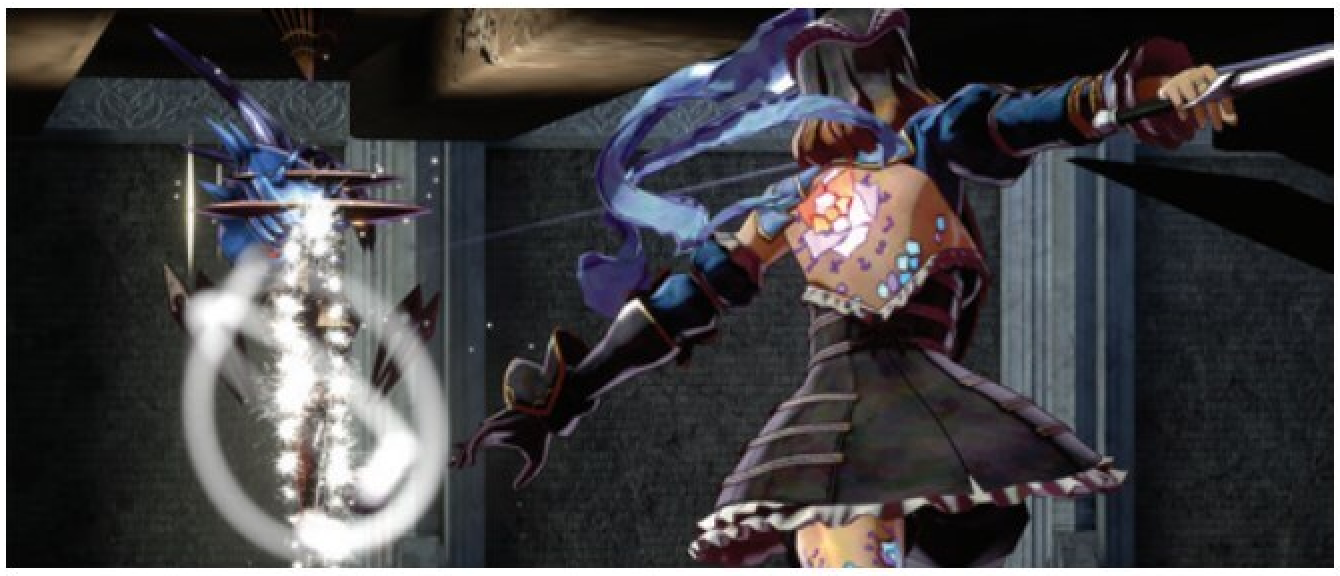
The Battle of Garreg Mach
(Fire Emblem: Three Houses)

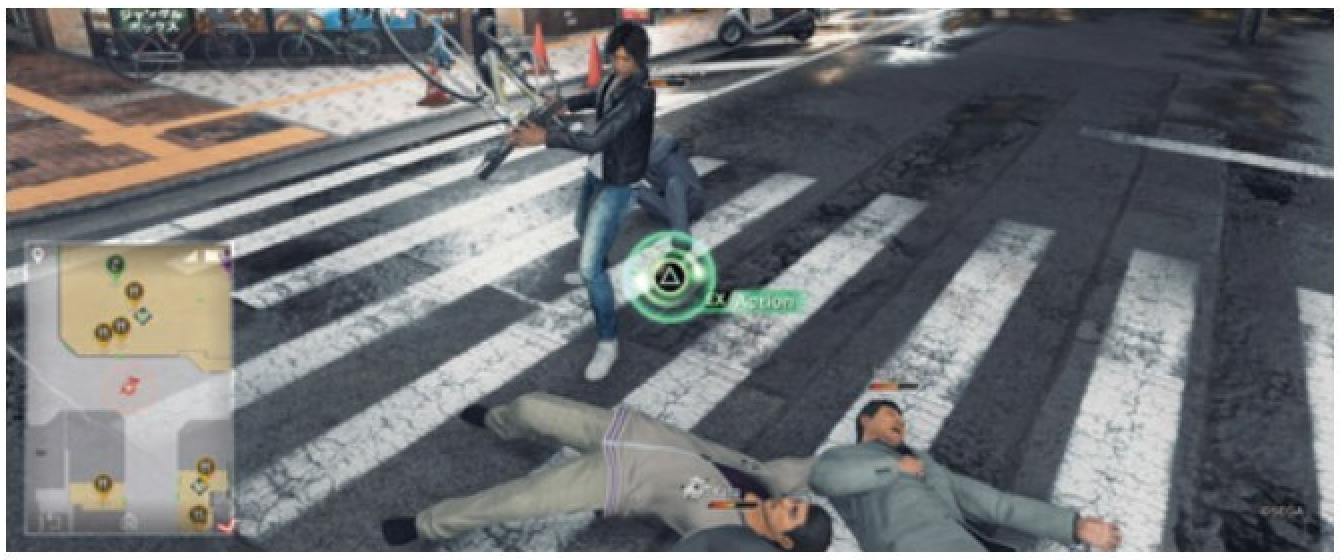
One of the most pivotal moments simultaneously raises the stakes, delivers shocking twists, and turns the narrative on its head, opening the way for meaningful choice.

BLOODSTAINED: RITUAL OF THE NIGHT

June 18 | PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC

Koji Igarashi returns to the formula that made him an industry luminary, and the resulting gothic fantasy feels like a natural spiritual successor to the legendary Castlevania: Symphony of the Night. You explore a massive castle and gain new powers, armor, and weapons as you go, gradually opening up a labyrinth of tunnels that twist and turn in surprising ways. Amid a boom in games inspired by Metroid and Castlevania, Bloodstained stands out as an impressive new entry from one of the original innovators in the genre.





JUDGMENT

June 25 | PS4

Ryū ga Gotoku Studio, the team behind the Yakuza series, veered off into slightly new territory with Judgment. There are plenty of returning elements, like the Kamurocho District setting and beat-'em-up-style combat, but the spinoff forged its own underworld identity. In Judgment, there's an additional private-investigator layer, where you interrogate suspects, piece together evidence, and do your best to crack a series of murders tied to a larger conspiracy.

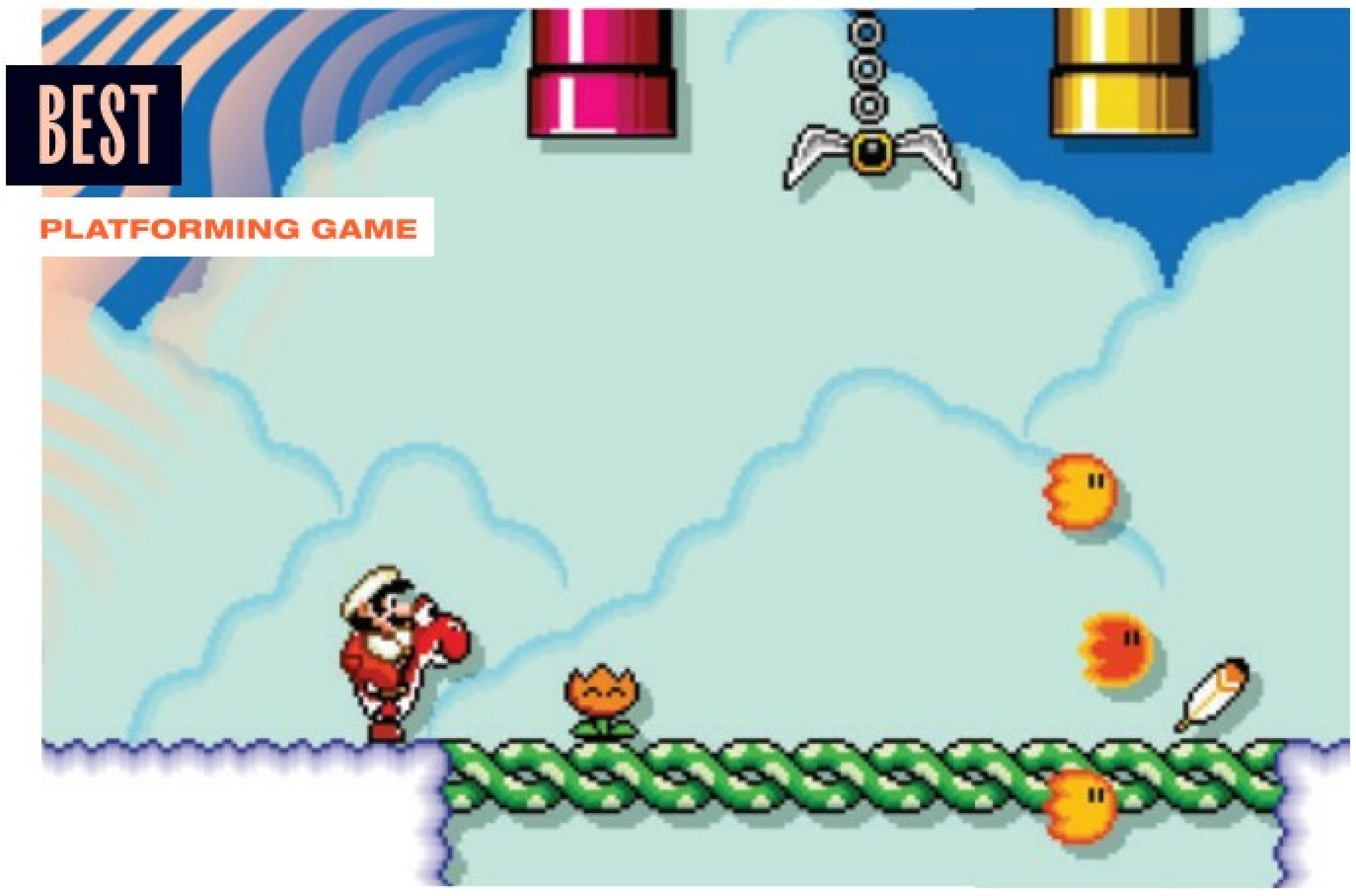
SUPER MARIO MAKER 2

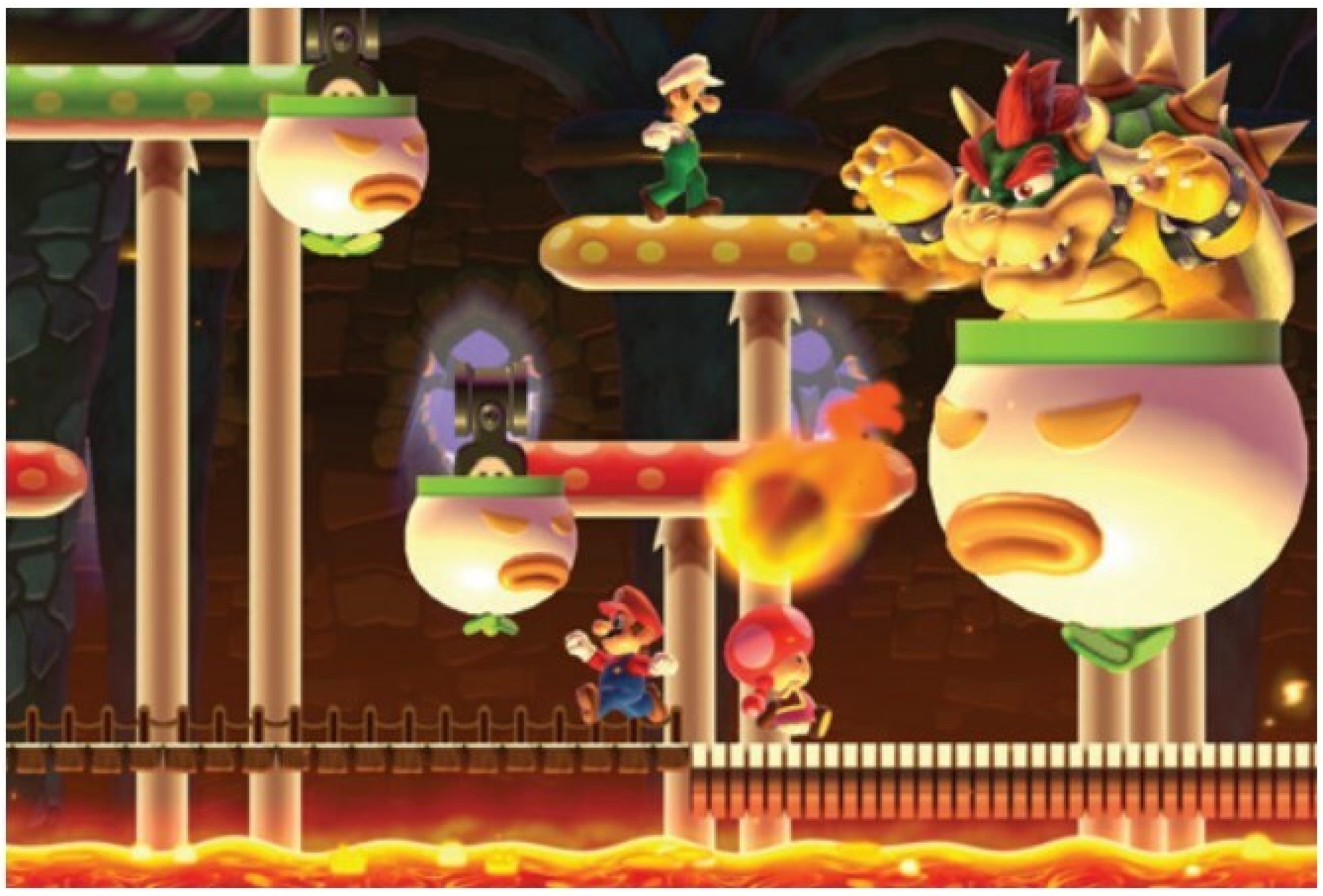
June 28 | Switch

The sequel to the Wii U's beloved level creator, Super Mario Maker 2 gives players more tools and more ways to create the Mario stages of their dreams (or nightmares). Whether you want to publish your own dastardly designs or download those of a massive, worldwide community, Super Mario Maker 2 delivers an endless stream of enjoyable content. On top of that, you get more than 100 all-new, rule-bending Mario stages created by Nintendo.

BEST

PLATFORMING GAME





Receiving the Order

(Observation)

The space station's A.I. receives a disturbing order to carry out against a crew member, and your execution of the demand changes the way you perceive your role on the station.

That Poor Kid

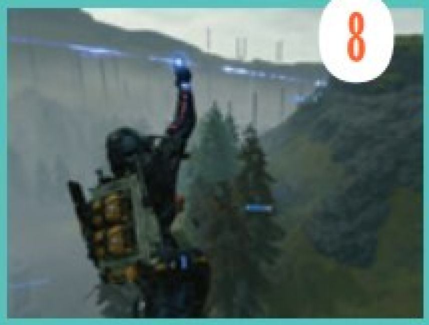
(Untitled Goose Game)

The premise of Untitled Goose Game is centered on being a foul fowl, but tormenting a child in town to the point that he locks himself in a phone booth elevates it to new levels.

Dueling Fates

(Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order)

Players get a slow build on the path to becoming a Jedi Master, but Fallen Order gives you a final battle that at once shows your potential and how far you still have to go.



Your First Zipline

(Death Stranding)

After lugging countless degrading packages through long treks across inhospitable terrain, realizing you can build a network of ziplines fundamentally changes the game.

Turning the Tables

(A Plague Tale: Innocence)

In a game where the presence of rats delivers an overwhelming sense of dread, the moment you realize they can actually be useful helps fulfill a great and unexpected power fantasy.

The Big Reunion

(Kingdom Hearts III)

After following the massive roster of characters throughout various mainline and side games, Kingdom Hearts fans finally got answers about what happened to some of their favorite heroes.

FINAL FANTASY XIV: SHADOWBRINGERS

July 2 | PS4, PC

Holding the narrative together in a sprawling, six-year-old MMORPG is difficult. However, Shadowbringers keeps Final Fantasy XIV alive with the game's best story arc to date. New areas and legendary boss fights make this new chapter memorable, and Square Enix's focus on accommodating solo content makes Shadowbringers feel more like a single-player Final Fantasy title than a traditional expansion.

DRAGON QUEST BUILDERS 2

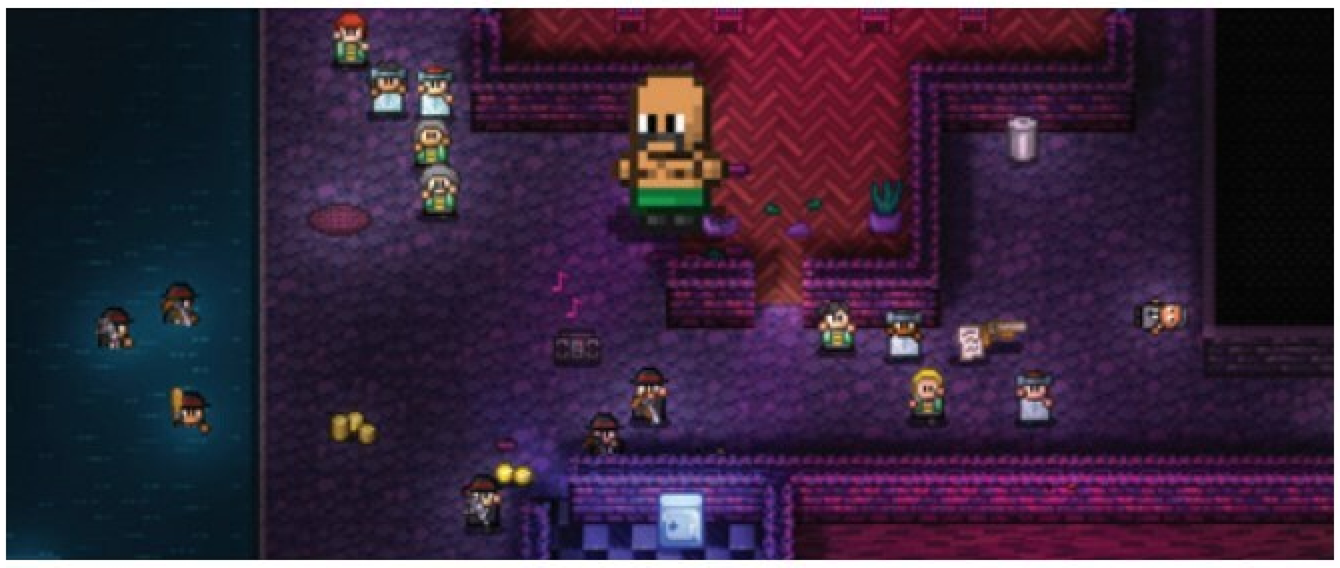
July 12 | PS4, Switch, PC

Square Enix further refined a solid concept in this sequel, delivering a great game for people who like the idea of Minecraft but also appreciate a structured adventure. Even players who couldn't give a rip about the long-running RPG series have plenty to love, including a feel-good story about traveling the world and making every stop along the way a little better. Construction is easy and intuitive, letting you focus on executing your ideas instead of struggling with the controls.

STREETS OF ROGUE

July 12 | PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC

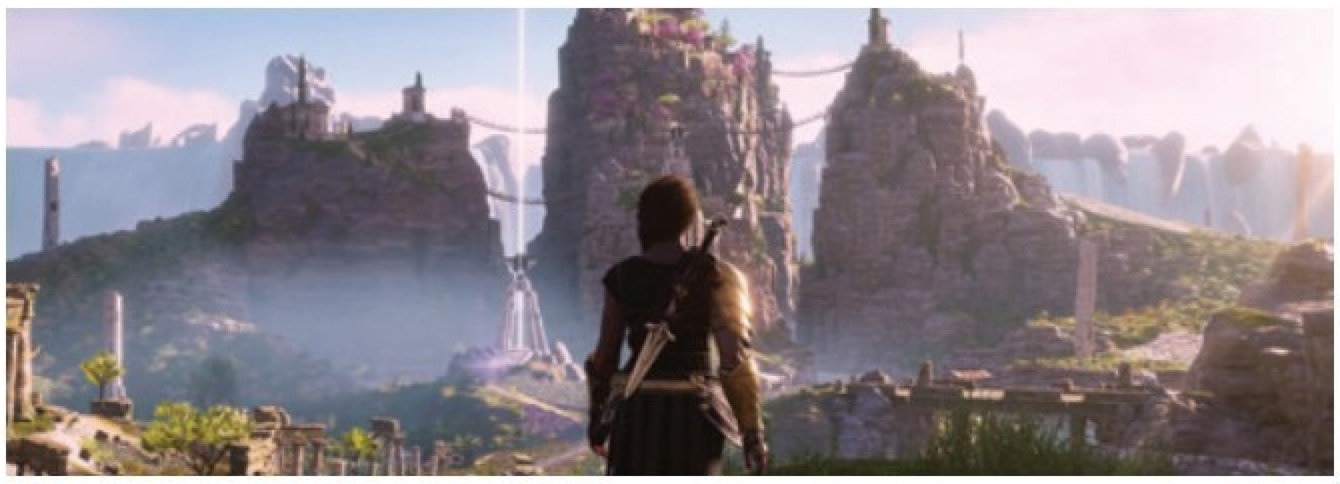
Streets of Rogue is all about tackling objectives the way you want. Featuring several characters with unique abilities to choose from, you accomplish feats in clever ways. Whether you're a soldier trying to shoot your way through enemies or a shapeshifter possessing them to stealthily complete objectives, the true fun comes from getting creative. Single-player is rewarding, but adding co-op partners is the definitive way to up the chaos and excitement.



ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY: THE FATE OF ATLANTIS

July 16 | PS4, Xbox One, PC

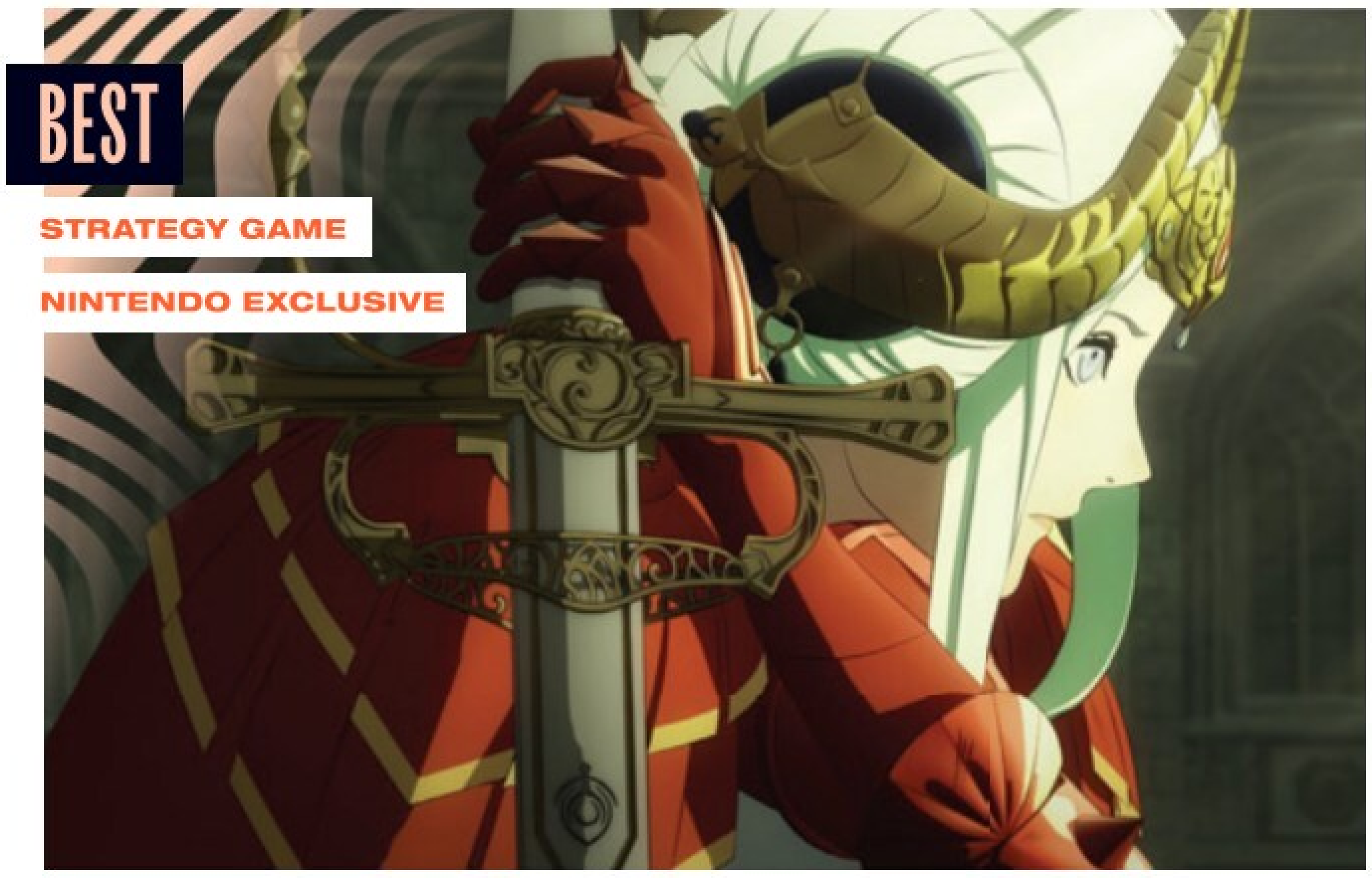
Odyssey had no shortage of content when it released, but this year's Atlantis-focused DLC episodes effectively amount to a full expansion. Massive new areas provide an opportunity to explore the beautiful and ethereal afterlife, while the story delves deep into the lore surrounding the series' mysterious First Civilization. Alongside fun combat abilities and quality-of-life improvements, Odyssey makes you feel more like a living god than ever.



FIRE EMBLEM: THREE HOUSES

July 26 | Switch

Whether you side with the Black Eagles, Blue Lions, or Golden Deer, Fire Emblem: Three Houses creates a deep and personal connection between you (the teacher) and your pupils. The bonds you forge with them are backed by great story arcs with memorable moments. All of your teaching pays off in big ways on the battlefield and through rich turn-based combat that gives you plenty of reasons to power-up your students to keep them alive and well. This is a game you won't be satisfied playing just once … or even twice.



BEST

STRATEGY GAME

NINTENDO EXCLUSIVE

REMNANT: FROM THE ASHES

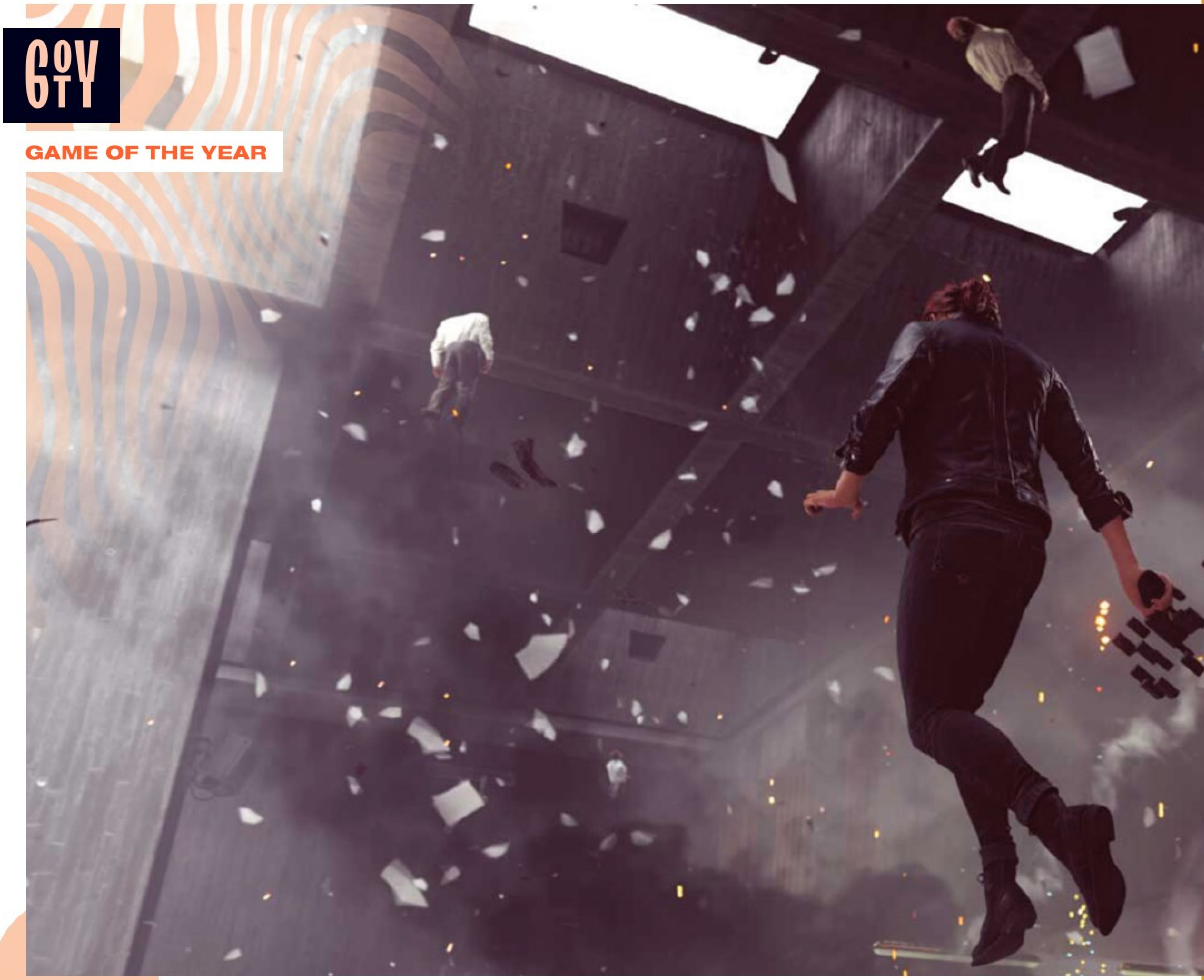
August 20 | PS4, Xbox One, PC

Gunfire Games keeps players on their toes in more ways than one with its RPG shooter. In addition to delivering freakish monsters to kill, the levels in Remnant: From the Ashes are procedurally generated – meaning that even veteran players not only won't know what dangers are around the corner, but if there's even going to be a corner in the first place. Co-op offers players new strategic options (and safety in numbers), while a steady drip of loot provides plenty of reasons to keep coming back.

TELLING LIES

August 23 | PC, Mac, iOS

The developer of Her Story returns with another narrative tour de force, in which you take on the role of an investigator carefully combing through video that depicts the fabrications of four distinct but connected individuals, using intuition and deduction to figure out what really happened. Thoughtful acting and immersive real-world overlay help you feel like you're enmeshed in the mystery at hand, and Telling Lies is as much a set of psychology case studies as it is a fascinating game.



CONTROL

August 27 | PS4, Xbox One, PC

The Federal Bureau of Control is a covert government agency tasked with combating supernatural phenomena – but nothing is stranger than the politics that happen between the shifting walls of the FBC's Oldest House. Jesse Faden's journey through the Oldest House begins with her looking for answers to her past. However, when she discovers that the FBC's previous director has committed suicide, she is quickly selected to assume the role herself. Unfortunately, this means that Jesse is the only one capable of preventing a hostile multi-dimensional force, known as the Hiss, from consuming our planet.

With Control, Remedy built its most compelling universe to date, while also creating an action powerhouse. Every firefight transforms the environment in a stunning display of destruction. The Oldest House is full of bizarre NPCs and otherworldly monsters, but it also contains tantalizing secrets and upgrades, many of which are nestled inside some truly oddball side stories.

As Jesse progresses through the FBC's shapeshifting maze, she gains an impressive array of powerful telekinetic skills that are an absolute blast to use. Tearing up concrete to use as a shield or tossing a chair across the room into an enemy's face never grows tiring, and these abilities are even more impactful thanks to Remedy's stunning visual effects. Control is a wild ride, and our controllers seemed almost telekinetically bonded to our hands until we rolled credits. With mind-bending action, compelling mysteries galore, and a power fantasy unlike anything else in 2019, Control is our Game of the Year.

KNIGHTS AND BIKES

August 27 | PS4, PC

Children possess wild imaginations and an unmatched eagerness for adventure. Developer Foam Sword harnesses those elements with Knights and Bikes, a game about friendship, hijinks, and cruising around on sweet bikes. Exploration and combat are straightforward fun, but the real highlights are the likeable characters and hand-painted art, which create a storybook atmosphere that almost makes you feel like a kid again.

TOP TEN
CHARACTERS

1

Parvati Holcomb
(The Outer Worlds)

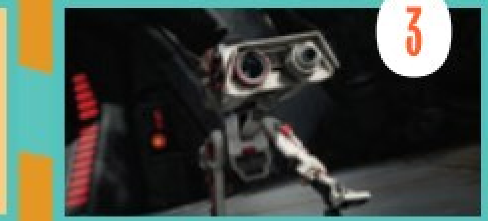
Many of The Outer Worlds' characters are well written, but none of them hold a candle to Parvati, an even-keeled, humorous, compassionate, and wonderful companion who you meet right out of the gates.

2

Goose
(Untitled Goose Game)

Being a jerk is not acceptable … unless you are a goose with an eye for mischief. This goose in particular is equally as villainous as it is adorable. It makes us laugh as it steals someone's prized possession, and we want to hug it whenever it honks.

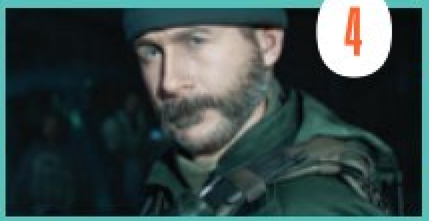
3



BD-1
(Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order)

Standing out in the crowd of R2-D2, C-3PO, and BB-8 sounds like an impossible feat, but Respawn Entertainment made BD-1 different enough to win us over in new ways. He's like a loyal dog who is always there to lend support.

4



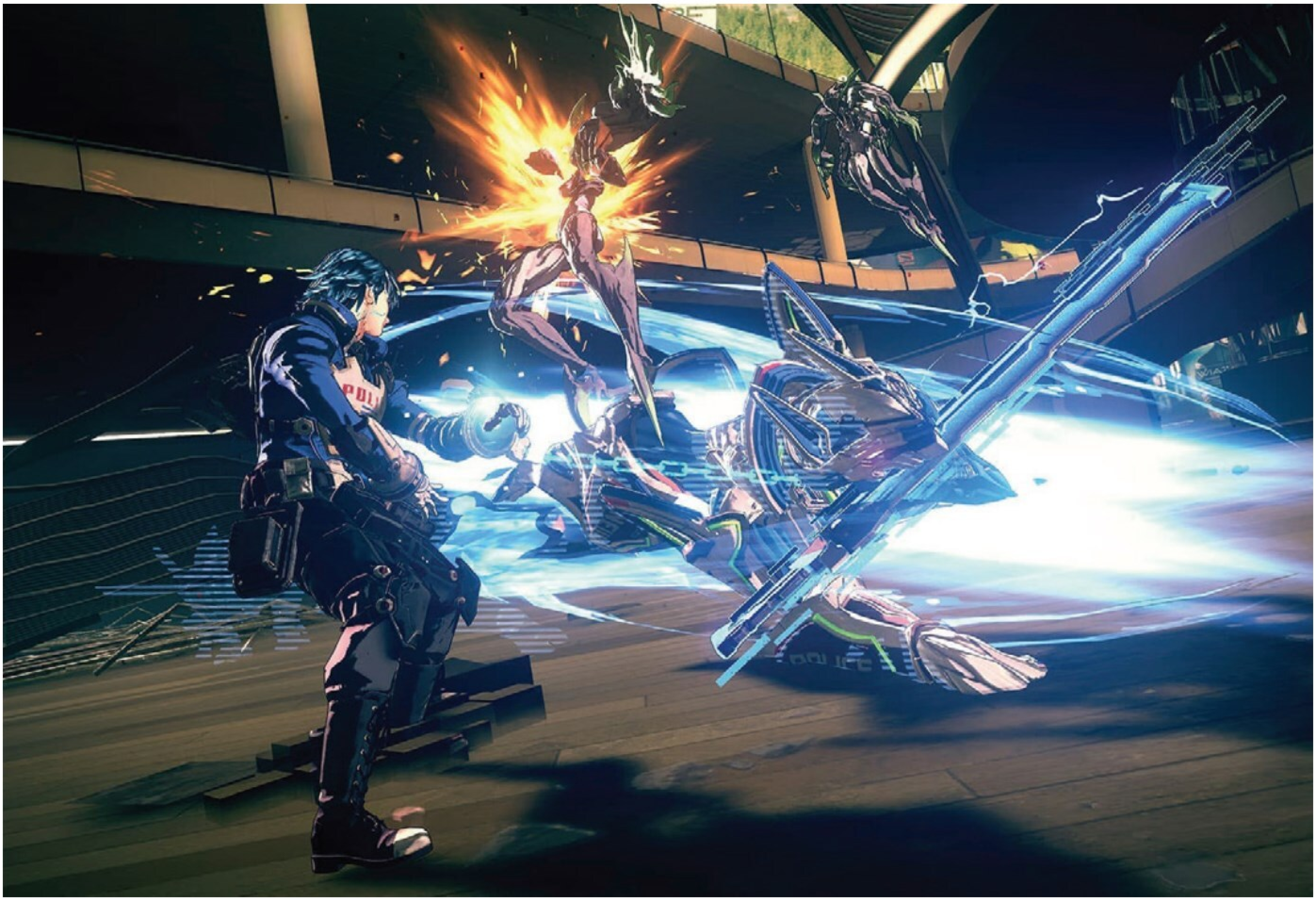
Captain Price
(Call of Duty: Modern Warfare)

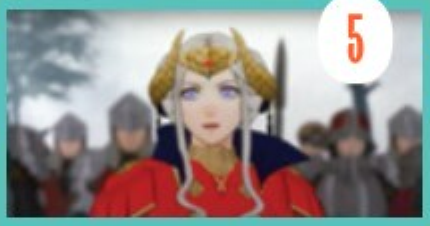
There's a reason why Captain Price is the most recognizable face in Call of Duty's history – he's the ultimate badass who, despite being calm and collected, can be a monster on the battlefield. He rightfully gets plenty of screen time in Modern Warfare.

ASTRAL CHAIN

August 30 | Switch

Platinum Games once again shows us its mastery of stylish action – this time through a breathtaking duet performed by a character and their monster. Astral Chain makes it easy to control two entities on the battlefield at once, making you feel powerful and agile against towering beasts. The fun action is backed by vibrant visuals, interesting characters to get to know, and a hell of a dimension-jumping story. Astral Chain is a unique riot from start to finish.





Edelgard
(Fire Emblem: Three Houses)
Determined and dignified, Edelgard seeks to challenge the status quo and knows sometimes sacrifices must be made for the greater good. Her intentions are noble, but it's the unexpected way that she takes matters into her own hands that makes her such a fascinating character.

Mr. X
(Resident Evil 2)
When the sharply dressed Mr. X heads your way, you had best run. He isn't your typical Resident Evil villain, yet is somehow more terrifying than the zombies, dogs, and giant sewer beasts. When you hear his footsteps, that's your cue to start moving.

Sekiro
(Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice)
Also known as "Wolf," Sekiro is a skillful shinobi who wields a blade well, yet is elevated by his unique prosthetic arm that can be upgraded with a variety of gadgets, and also be used as a grappling hook.

Lt. Kitsuragi
(Disco Elysium)
The perfect foil for almost every choice you make, Lt. Kitsuragi is smart, professional, and always says the right things to direct your character's chaos in the right ways to get through investigations and solve murders. He's the perfect partner.

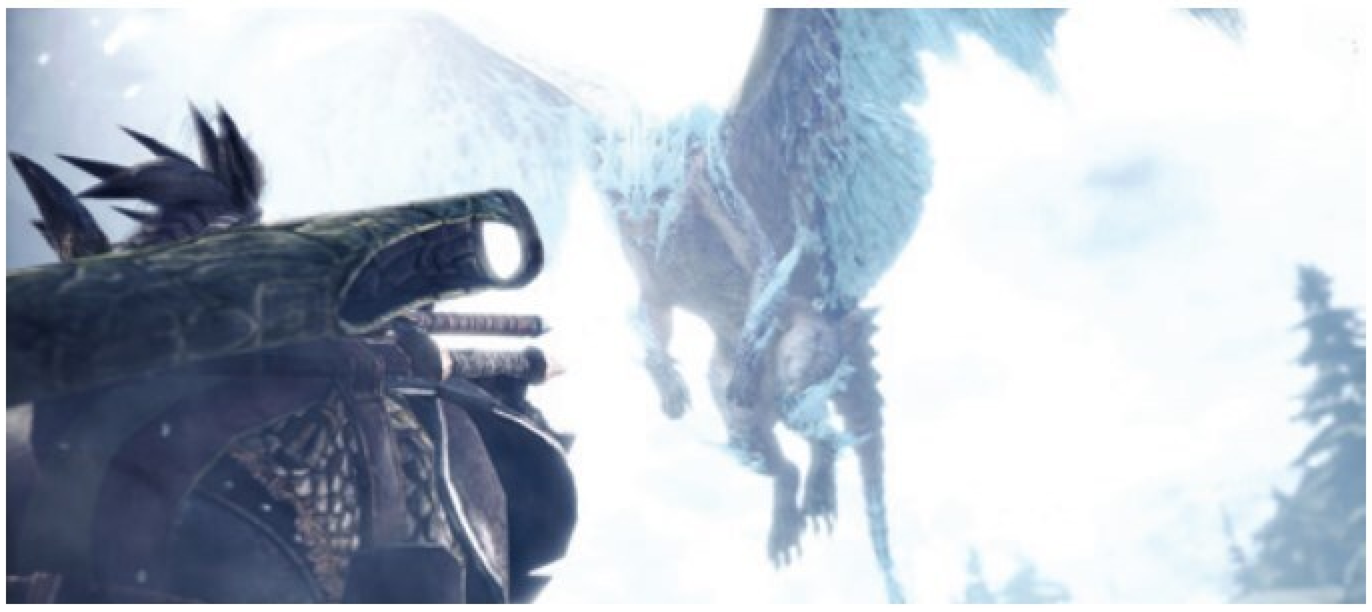
Jesse Faden
(Control)
The walls move and talk, but hardly anything phases Jesse, the intelligent and resourceful head of the Federal Bureau of Control. Even though she wields a gun, she has powers like a Jedi and controls them like a master.

Amicia de Rune
(A Plague Tale: Innocence)
Amicia is just a teenager, but when the Inquisition raids her family's estate and destroys her way of life, she is forced to grow up quickly. Headstrong, caring, and resourceful, Amicia's journey to protect her brother is heartbreaking and inspiring.

MONSTER HUNTER WORLD: ICEBORNE

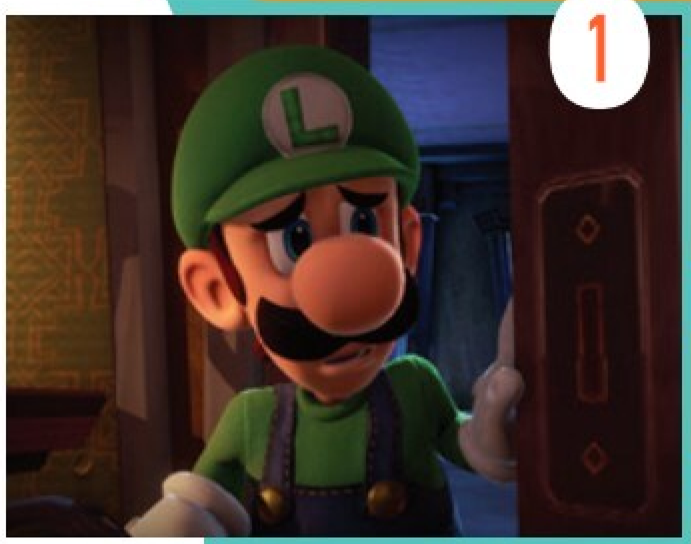
September 6 | PS4, Xbox One

Capcom gives monster hunters plenty of reasons to renew their licenses with its Iceborne expansion. Sure, it offers an all-new area – the frosty lands of Seliana – but it also provides plenty of fundamental tweaks to the core combat. Hunters can more easily tackle new and familiar beasts with a grappling-hook-like clutch claw, directing their prey in unprecedented ways. It's not a pushover in terms of difficulty, but Monster Hunter fans wouldn't want it any other way.

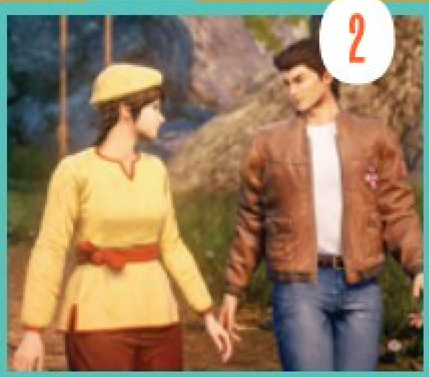


TOP TEN

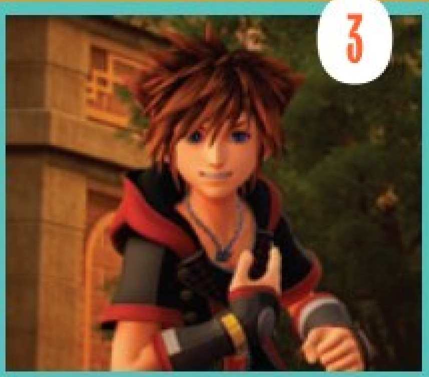
DORKS



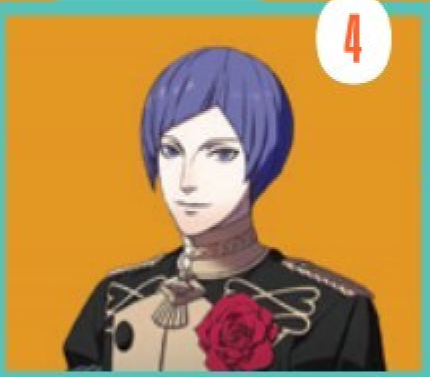
Luigi
(Luigi's Mansion 3)
As the concept of "second place" personified, Luigi deserves the Lifetime Dork Achievement Award – but we still love this ghost-hunting scaredy-cat. Of course, we love Mario more.



Ryo
(Shenmue III)
It takes a special kind of loser to transform something cool (like "quest for vengeance") into something lame (like "catching ducks"). Nice work avenging your dad, Ryo.



Sora
(Kingdom Hearts III)
On one hand, Sora is a brave hero who accomplishes amazing things. On the other hand, he's a goofy poindexter who takes bad selfies and belts out songs with no self-awareness.



Lorenz
(Fire Emblem: Three Houses)
We could make fun of Lorenz for lots of reasons, like his inflated ego and try-hard approach to dating. But if we're being honest, he's on this list because of that dumb haircut.

GEARS 5

September 10 | Xbox One, PC

Picking up where the last campaign left off, Gears 5 delivers an action-packed story that answers fans' biggest questions, tries new things, and builds to a climactic final act that stands out as one of the best sequences in the series' history. Add a return to form for the competitive multiplayer suite, the fan-favorite Horde mode, and an intense, all-new timed mode called Escape, and this is among the best Gears experiences yet.

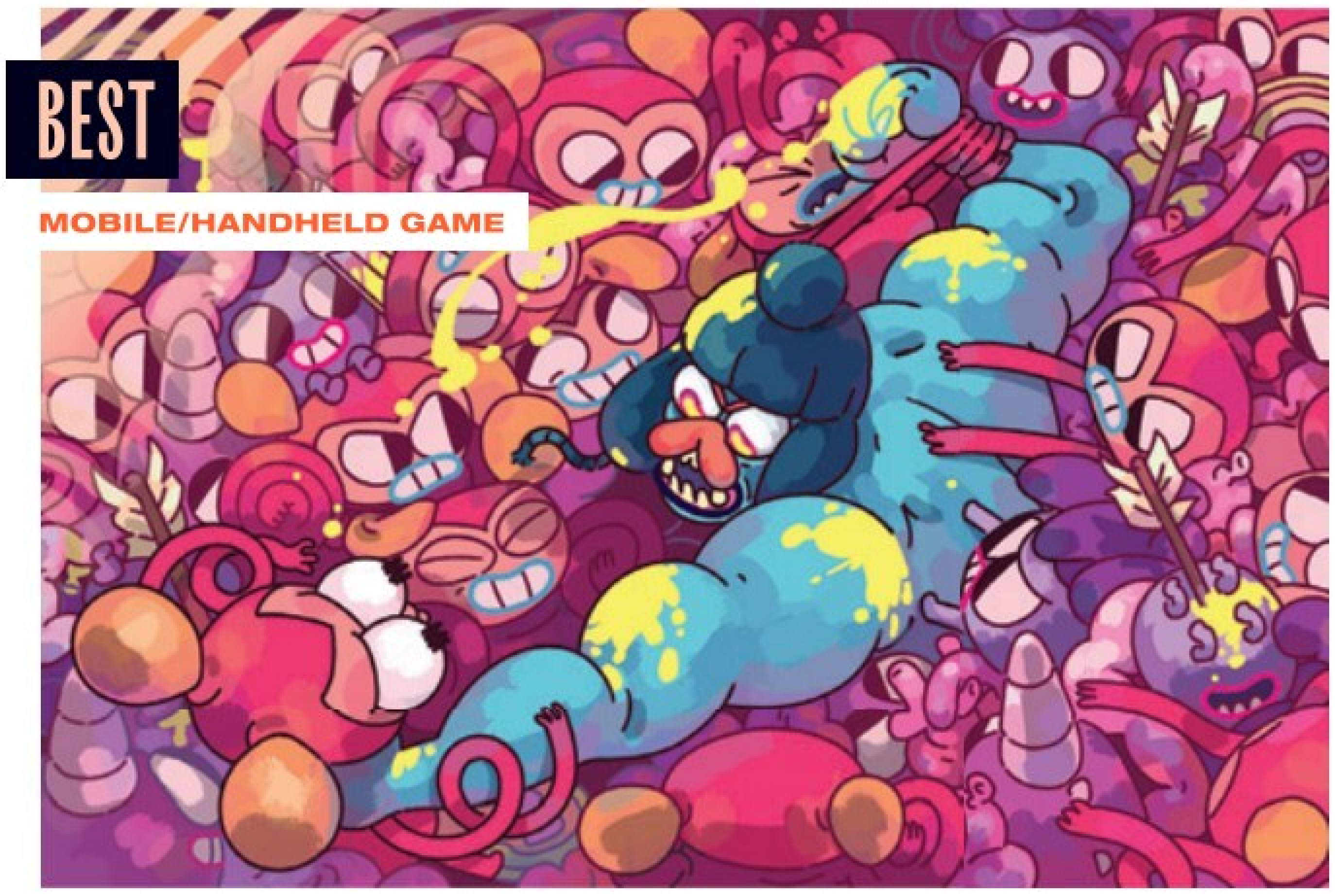
BEST

MICROSOFT EXCLUSIVE

BORDERLANDS 3

September 13 | PS4, Xbox One, Stadia, PC

A lot has changed since the release of Borderlands 2. With the advent of the online looter shooter, Gearbox could've easily abandoned the foundations of what made Borderlands great in order to conform to what's trendy. But the team stuck to its burger-launching guns and gave fans a Borderlands for the modern age. Welcome additions to character movement, in-game events, and the Circle of Slaughter arena mesh with the sophomoric world that cements Borderlands 3 as one of the best in the series.



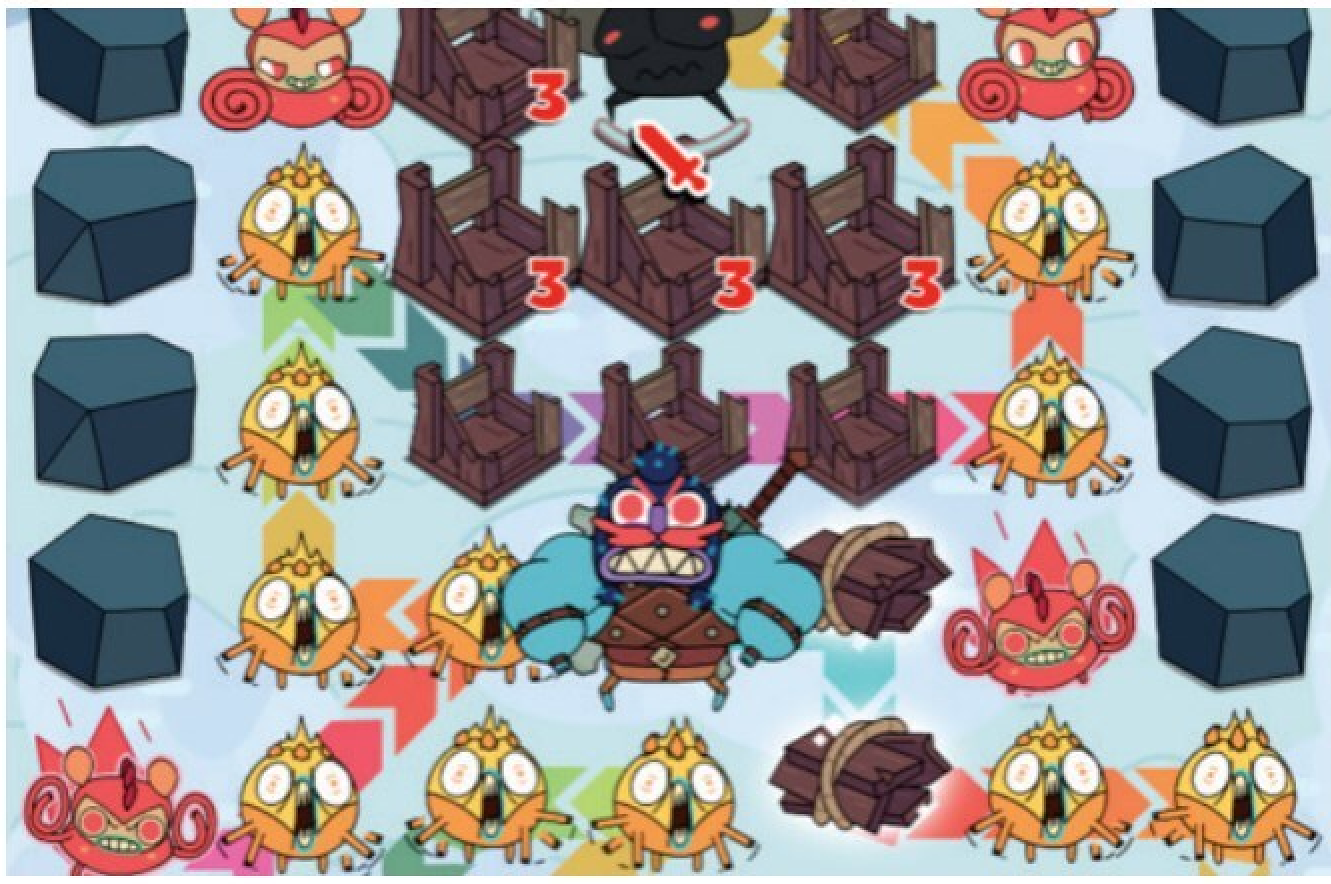
BEST

MOBILE/HANDHELD GAME

GRINDSTONE

September 19 | iOS

Capy Games' monster-slashing puzzle game is easily the standout gem in the new Apple Arcade service. You are a Viking-like warrior tasked with tearing through hordes of adorable monsters by tracing lines through creatures. As you upgrade your gear, you open up new ways to strategically carve longer and longer swaths of carnage across the battlefield. These simple but addictive puzzle mechanics kept our noses glued to Grindstone well into the evening hours.



5

Deadman
(Death Stranding)

Deadman admits he has no friends, so he clings to Sam like a desperate, holographic barnacle in need of human contact.

6

Lappy
(Astral Chain)

According to Astral Chain, annoying dog mascots are a great fit for any tone and context. Especially if you want to tell a semi-serious story about battle-demons.

7

V
(Devil May Cry 5)

With a mopey emo vibe and a fighting style based on summoning monsters, V really caters to stylish-action fans who don't like looking awesome or doing cool things.

8

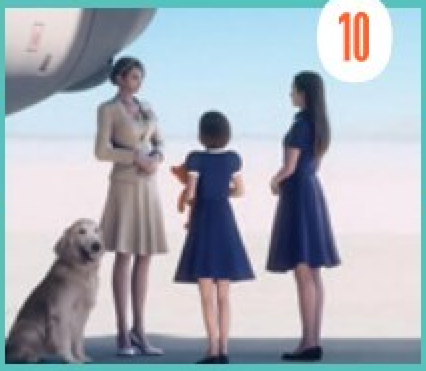
Owen
(Anthem)

Owen fulfills BioWare's obligation to always include a "funny" character who gets on players' nerves and/or screws everything up. At least Anthem lives up to expectations on that front.

9

Ball Guy
(Pokémon Sword & Shield)

First, his name is "Ball Guy." Second, he wears a Poké Ball on his head. Third, he does a bizarre dance with lots of hip-thrusting. Fourth, his name is "Ball Guy."



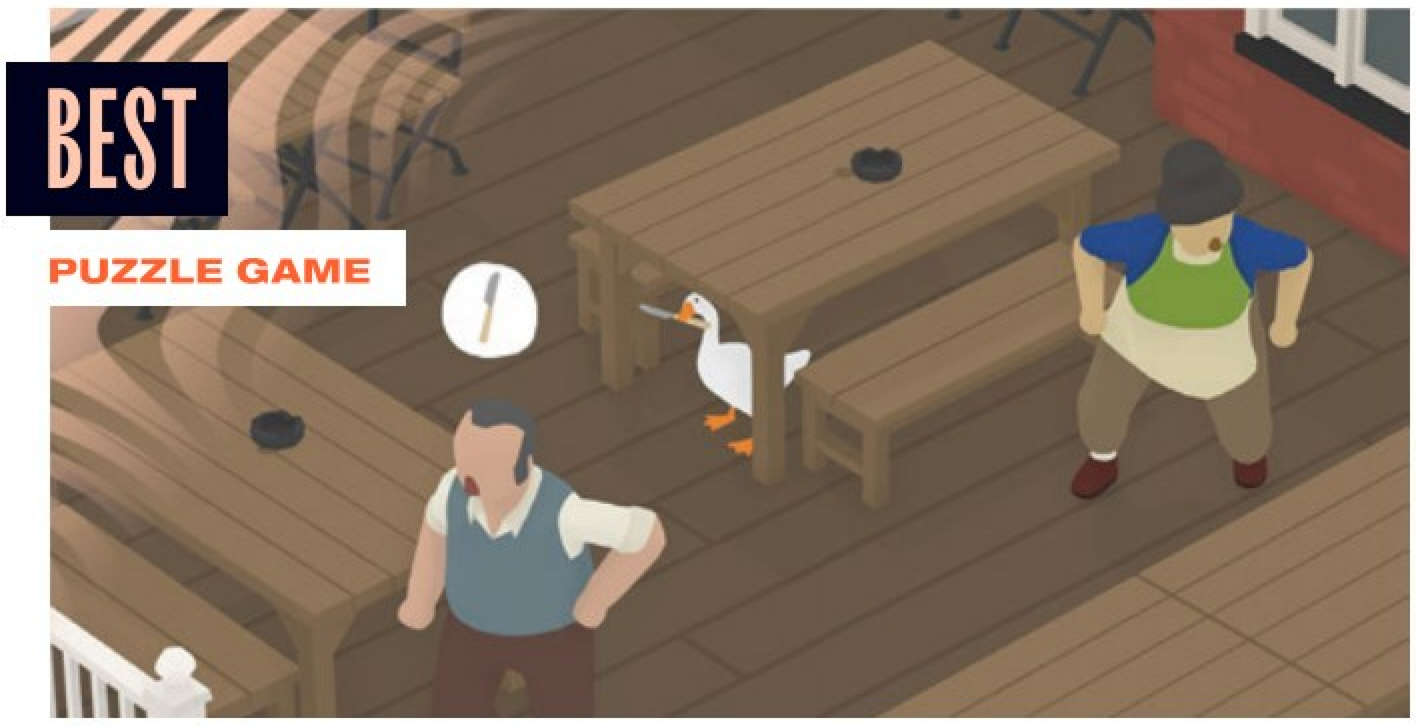
10

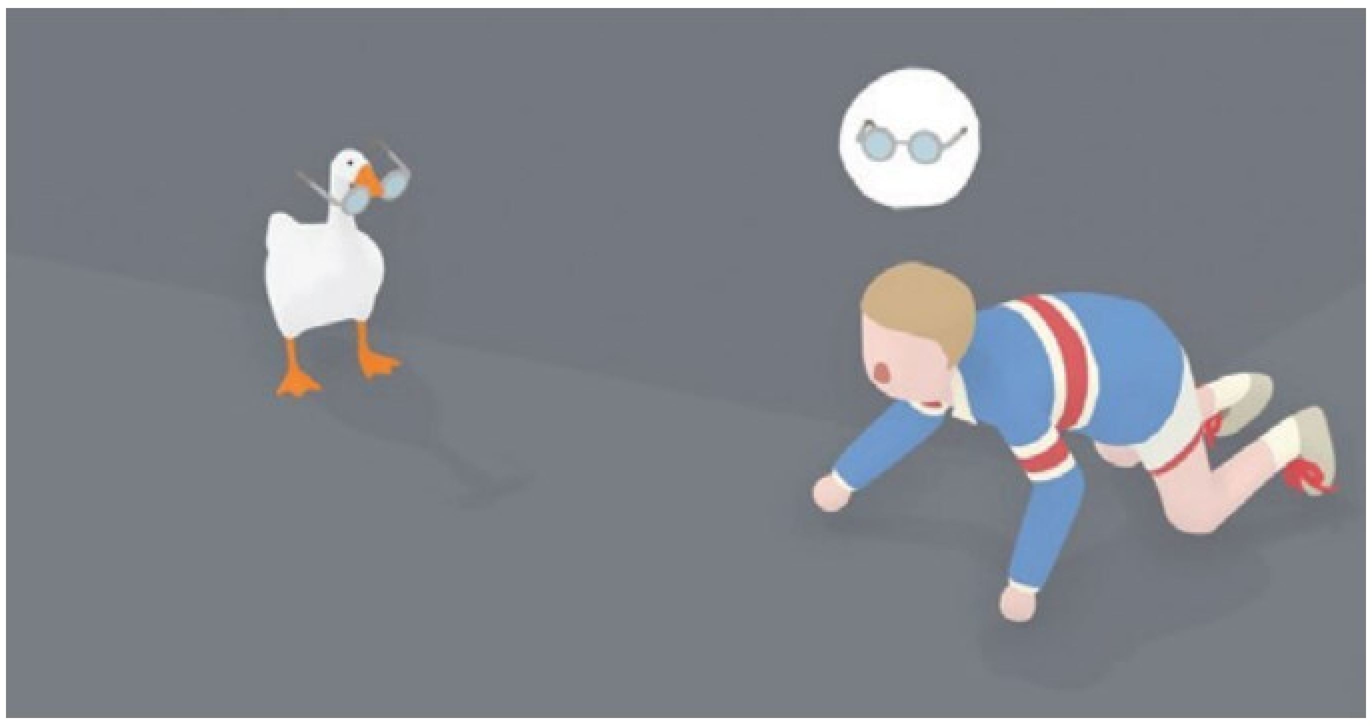
Stock Photo Dog
(Ace Combat 7: Skies Unknown)

We do not blame the cute dog in this picture, but we do blame the Ace Combat 7 developers who crammed the conspicuously static image into an otherwise animated cutscene.

BEST

PUZZLE GAME





UNTITLED GOOSE GAME

September 20 | PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC

The idea is simple: You are a resplendent goose (honk!) and you antagonize the residents (honk! honk!) of an idyllic village. You accomplish all sorts of mischief (honk! honk! honk!), like dragging rakes into the lake and sowing discord among neighbors (honk! honk! honk! honk!). Go ahead, give in and become The Goose incarnate – they are powerless to stop you (honk! honk! honk! honk! honk! honk! honk! honk! honk!).

MAGIC: THE GATHERING ARENA

September 26 | PC

Magic: The Gathering has had numerous digital incarnations over the years, with some titles adhering to the tabletop card game and others more boisterous offshoots. With Magic: The Gathering Arena, Wizards of the Coast embraces the free-to-play digital landscape, offering players a wide variety of both casual and competitive formats to engage in while maintaining the purity of the paper game's rules. Make no mistake, Magic: The Gathering Arena is the best version of digital Magic – and maybe the best way to play, period.

DESTINY 2: SHADOWKEEP

October 1 | PS4, Xbox One, Stadia, PC

With its latest expansion, the long-running online multiplayer shooter has fully embraced its MMO potential, extending long-term engagement through customizable armor, seasonal artifacts and leveling, and greater depth across the board. The narrative focus has also picked up steam, finally turning players' attention to the long-teased conflict at the heart of the franchise; the Darkness is coming, and now players are just waiting to see the mystery finally take shape.

BEST

PC GAME

DISCO ELYSIUM

October 15 | PC

A murder has been committed in the fictional city of Revachol, and you must solve it. The problem? You are an even bigger catastrophe than the crime scene. Disco Elysium casts you as a pathetic detective constantly struggling with the different facets of his mind – a clever internal conflict represented through brilliant writing. The unconventional characters and world are equally fascinating, making this a compelling and satisfying mystery inside and out.

THE LEGEND OF HEROES: TRAILS OF COLD STEEL III

October 22 | PS4

Nihon Falcom's Trails series continues to entertain and surprise fans at every turn. The third entry in this four-game arc cements the expansive storyline and the deep political world Falcom has built. And it only gets bigger here with new characters, twists, and combat mechanics. The callbacks and character reunions are the real highlights, providing a payoff for the long investment. Trails of Cold Steel III is a solid RPG, especially if you yearn for something with a classic feel, and modern sensibilities.

LONELY MOUNTAINS: DOWNHILL

October 23 | PS4, Xbox One, PC

Take the endless restarts of the Trials games, the classic isometric views of Marble Madness, and the boundless beauty of ambient nature sounds and a pristine wilderness, and you have a pretty good start at understanding why this mountain-biking experience is so consistently fun. With several mountain landscapes, multiple bikes with their own playstyles, and countless paths to discover and explore, this lonely challenge can keep you busy for dozens of hours.

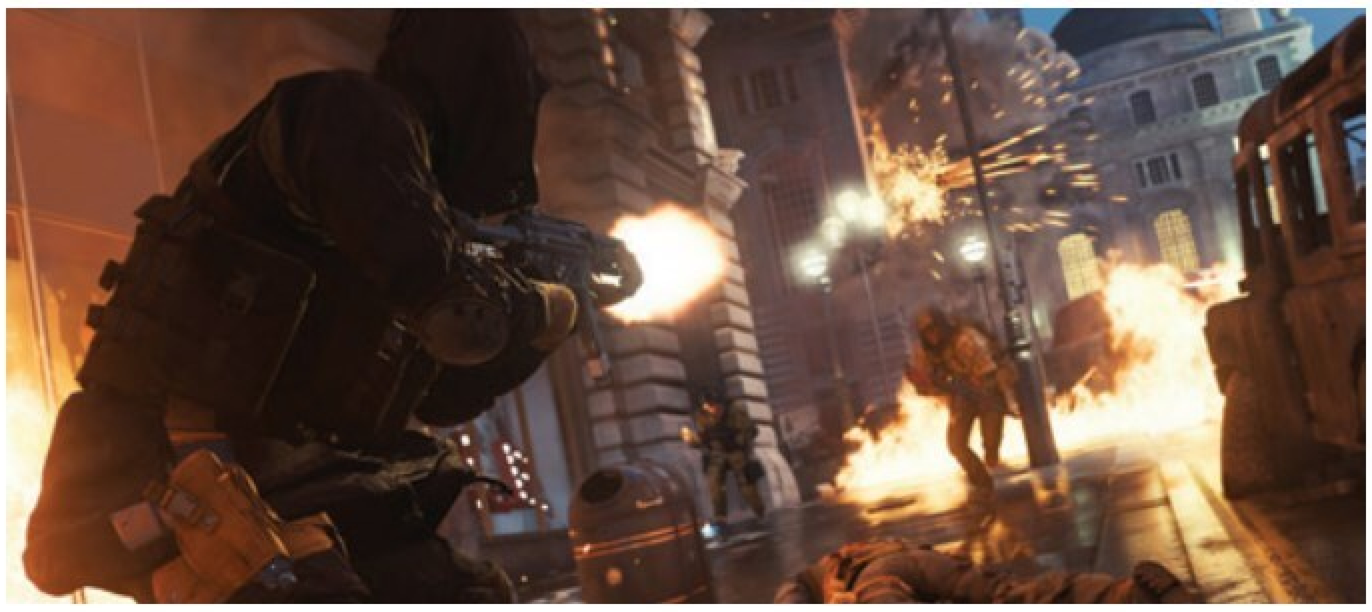
BEST

SHOOTER GAME

CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE

October 25 | PS4, Xbox One, PC

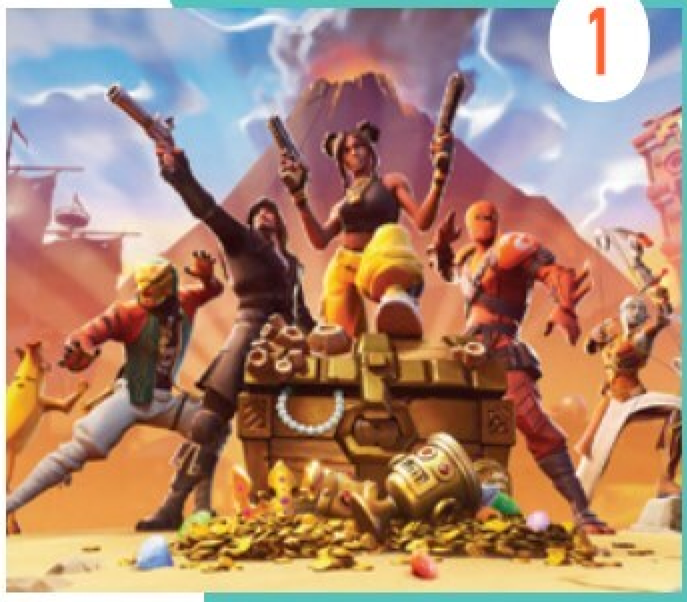
Captain Price is back in action, but this Modern Warfare reboot is a different beast entirely, with a story that fully embraces the horrors of war, and multiplayer that shakes up the age-old formula. The single-player campaign gets uncomfortable, yet has a hell of a story to tell, and who would have thought that smaller scale 2v2 battles would be all the rage? Modern Warfare looks stunning, retains the great flow and feel of combat, and its daring to be different makes it standout in the always-crowded shooter market.



TOP TEN

GAMES-AS-SERVICE

1



Fortnite

Like an actual black hole, it was nearly impossible to escape Fortnite's world-ending event on social media. Epic's other frequent updates easily secure this game the number one spot.

2

Rainbow Six Siege

Ubisoft's refined shooter got better with reworked maps, fun new operators like the grappling-hook-equipped Amaru, and the inclusion of beloved pro league features in ranked.

3

Final Fantasy XIV

Shadowbringers is one of the most talked-about MMO expansions in years. That combined with other steady updates and patches, and it's easy to see why FF XIV is still going strong.

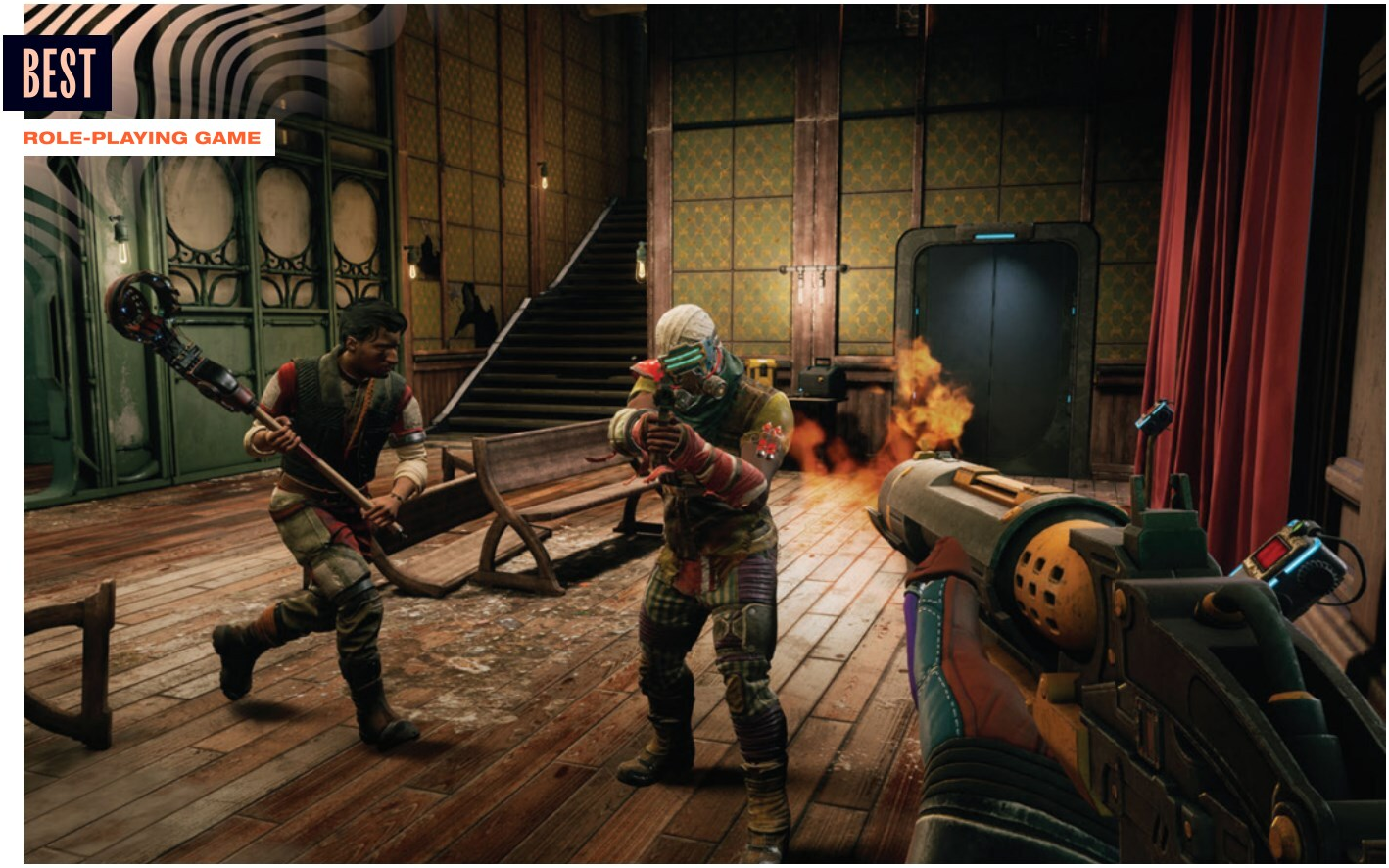
4

Destiny 2

Bungie's Shadowkeep expansion is a lot of fun, and the studio continues to move toward an MMO model, with sizeable season pass rewards and cross-save functionality.

BEST

ROLE-PLAYING GAME



THE OUTER WORLDS

October 25 | PS4, Xbox One, PC

In a space colony where corporate interests have run wild, The Outer Worlds lets you shape your own story with creative solutions to entertaining problems. Part Mass Effect and part Fallout, this irreverent sci-fi RPG combines first-person combat and open-world exploration.

With a crew of colorful companions by your side, you experience a wonderfully irreverent setting that still has some serious depth. Success isn't just a matter of choosing between stealth or aggression; you can complete sidequests to win people over, play factions against each other, and use your silver tongue to wriggle out of tricky situations. The Outer Worlds may draw inspiration from other sources, but the team at Obsidian skillfully executes its unique vision with clever writing and a commitment to player choice.

Apex Legends

At the beginning of the year, we didn't even know about Respawn's killer battle royale, but since launch, the studio has updated the game with a few seasons worth of new characters and a whole new map.

World of Warcraft

Blizzard didn't simply update its genre-defining MMO, it resurrected the original iteration (complete with new bells and whistles) for free to anyone with a subscription.

Red Dead Online

In a year, Rockstar has nearly doubled Red Dead Online's content, introducing things like Frontier Pursuits, which allow fans to roleplay as bounty hunters, traders, and moonshiners.

Dota 2

Valve delivered some big changes to Dota 2 – including new heroes, items, and building types, just to name a few – which have some fans feeling like it's an entirely new game.

League of Legends

After a decade, Riot still knows how to support its flagship MOBA. This year, along with the usual stuff, we got Teamfight Tactics, the studio's take on auto battlers.

Path of Exile

Few games can compete for Diablo's crown, but Path of Exile comes close. This year's wealth of new content included new loot, skills, and even a tower-defense mode.

LUIGI'S MANSION 3

October 31 | Switch

After three games, Luigi is in danger of becoming more known for his role as an amateur Ghostbuster than being Mario's brother. This time, he's tasked with not only saving Mario, Peach, and several Toads from a host of apparitions, but also with cleansing an entire hotel of spooky spirits. With themed floors full of frightfully inventive puzzles and crazy ghosts to vacuum up, Luigi's Mansion 3 may be this plumber's most spectacular specter-filled adventure yet.

BEST
VR GAME

PISTOL WHIP

November 7 | Oculus, Vive

Pistol Whip feels like the kind of VR rhythm game that John Wick would design. As you march through a series of preset environments, waves of baddies jump out from behind cover and you must take them out before their itchy trigger fingers get the best of you. This might sound like a simple VR shooting gallery, but Pistol Whip's pulse-pounding soundtrack, generous auto-aim, and pitch-perfect action makes us feel like legendary action heroes each time we play.

DEATH STRANDING

November 8 | PS4

Creator Hideo Kojima's post-Metal Gear game is an audacious attempt to create something as sublime as human connection. Death Stranding succeeds through the unlikely journey of Sam Porter Bridges, who rebuilds America one helpful package delivery at a time. The combat and story aren't the strongest, but the core loop is satisfying, making you feel like a pioneer in the unforgiving wilderness.

POKÉMON SWORD & SHIELD

November 15 | Switch

As the first new generation of games on consoles, Pokémon Sword and Pokémon Shield had lofty expectations. With great monster designs, a fun narrative surrounding the traditional gym challenge, and a superb new region to explore, the latest games deliver. Add in the Wild Area, a vast, open expanse with plenty of Pokémon to catch and battle in raids, as well as a fun post-game arc, and Sword & Shield serves as a terrific next evolution for the series.

STAR WARS JEDI: FALLEN ORDER

November 15 | PS4, Xbox One, PC

Respawn Entertainment brings the Force back to gaming in a powerful way in Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order. The sense of discovery hangs heavily over the entire experience, both in the worlds Cal Kestis and his droid BD-1 explore and in the abilities and revelations they uncover along the way. Respawn's decision to make combat a defensive game also pays off handsomely, as players are forced to break down enemies rather than haphazardly slash at them. The game looks and sounds like a Star Wars film with Metroid-like detours thrown in for good measure. You can't ask for a better combo.

BEST

ADVENTURE GAME

LIFE IS STRANGE 2

December 3 | PS4, Xbox One, PC

Developer Dontnod concludes the episodic story of Sean and Daniel Diaz, and the complete arc makes impressive strides forward for choice-driven games. As you try to keep the fugitive brothers safe, your decisions also build a compelling bond between them. That bond then shapes how young Daniel uses his mysterious telekinetic powers, so you see the surprising results of your choices right up until the climactic finale. ◆

EDITOR TOP TEN PICKS

Andy McNamara

01 Control
02 Luigi’s Mansion 3
03 World of Warcraft
04 Call of Duty: Modern Warfare
05 Resident Evil 2
06 Destiny 2: Shadowkeep
07 The Outer Worlds
08 Grindstone
09 Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order
10 Photographs

Kimberley Wallace

01 Fire Emblem: Three Houses
02 Resident Evil 2
03 Kingdom Hearts III
04 The Outer Worlds
05 Control
06 Monster Hunter World: Iceborne
07 Telling Lies
08 Persona Q2: New Cinema Labyrinth
09 Ring Fit Adventure
10 The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel III

Jeff Cork

01 Days Gone
02 The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening
03 Dragon Quest Builders 2
04 Hypnospace Outlaw
05 Judgment
06 Shakedown: Hawaii
07 Earth Defense Force: Iron Rain
08 The Division 2
09 The Outer Worlds
10 Untitled Goose Game

Andrew Reiner

01 Control
02 Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order
03 The Outer Worlds
04 Disco Elysium
05 Resident Evil 2
06 Slay the Spire
07 Apex Legends
08 Fire Emblem: Three Houses
09 Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice
10 The Division 2

Joe Juba

01 Disco Elysium
02 The Outer Worlds
03 Untitled Goose Game
04 Judgment
05 Devil May Cry 5
06 Life is Strange 2
07 Death Stranding
08 Crackdown 3
09 Assassin's Creed Odyssey: The Fate of Atlantis
10 Dragon's Dogma: Dark Arisen (Switch)

Matt Miller

01 Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order
02 Destiny 2: Shadowkeep
03 Lonely Mountains: Downhill
04 The Outer Worlds
05 Mosaic
06 Arise: A Simple Story
07 Assassin's Creed Odyssey: The Fate of Atlantis
08 Audica
09 Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night
10 Sky: Children of the Light

Daniel Tack

01 Slay The Spire
02 Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice
03 Final Fantasy XIV: Shadowbringers
04 The Division 2
05 Resident Evil 2
06 Magic: The Gathering Arena
07 Sunless Skies
08 World of Warcraft Classic
09 Apex Legends
10 Remnant: From the Ashes

Brian Shea

01 Control
02 Gears 5
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04 Pokémon Sword & Shield
05 Streets of Rogue
06 Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order
07 Super Mario Maker 2
08 Luigi's Mansion 3
09 Assassin's Creed Odyssey: The Fate of Atlantis
10 Call of Duty: Modern Warfare

Matthew Kato

01 Control
02 Resident Evil 2
03 Mosaic
04 Observation
05 Dirt Rally 2.0
06 The Outer Worlds
07 eFootball PES 2020
08 MLB The Show 19
09 Death Stranding
10 Lonely Mountains: Downhill

Ben Reeves

01 Resident Evil 2
02 Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order
03 Control
04 Disco Elysium
05 Fire Emblem: Three Houses
06 Dr. Mario World
07 Luigi's Mansion 3
08 The Outer Worlds
09 Dragon Quest Builders 2
10 What the Golf?

Leo Vader

01 Ape Out
02 Streets of Rogue
03 Hypnospace Outlaw
04 Disco Elysium
05 Dreams
06 Outer Wilds
07 The Outer Worlds
08 Nowhere Prophet
09 Card of Darkness
10 Pistol Whip

Alex Stadnik

01 The Outer Worlds
02 Pokémon Sword & Shield
03 Apex Legends
04 Call of Duty: Modern Warfare
05 Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order
06 The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening
07 Luigi's Mansion 3
08 Tetris 99
09 A Plague Tale: Innocence
10 Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice

READER & EDITOR

GAMES OF THE YEAR

GOTY

GAME OF THE YEAR

EDITOR CHOICE E

Control

READER CHOICE R

Resident Evil 2

BEST

COOPERATIVE MULTIPLAYER

E

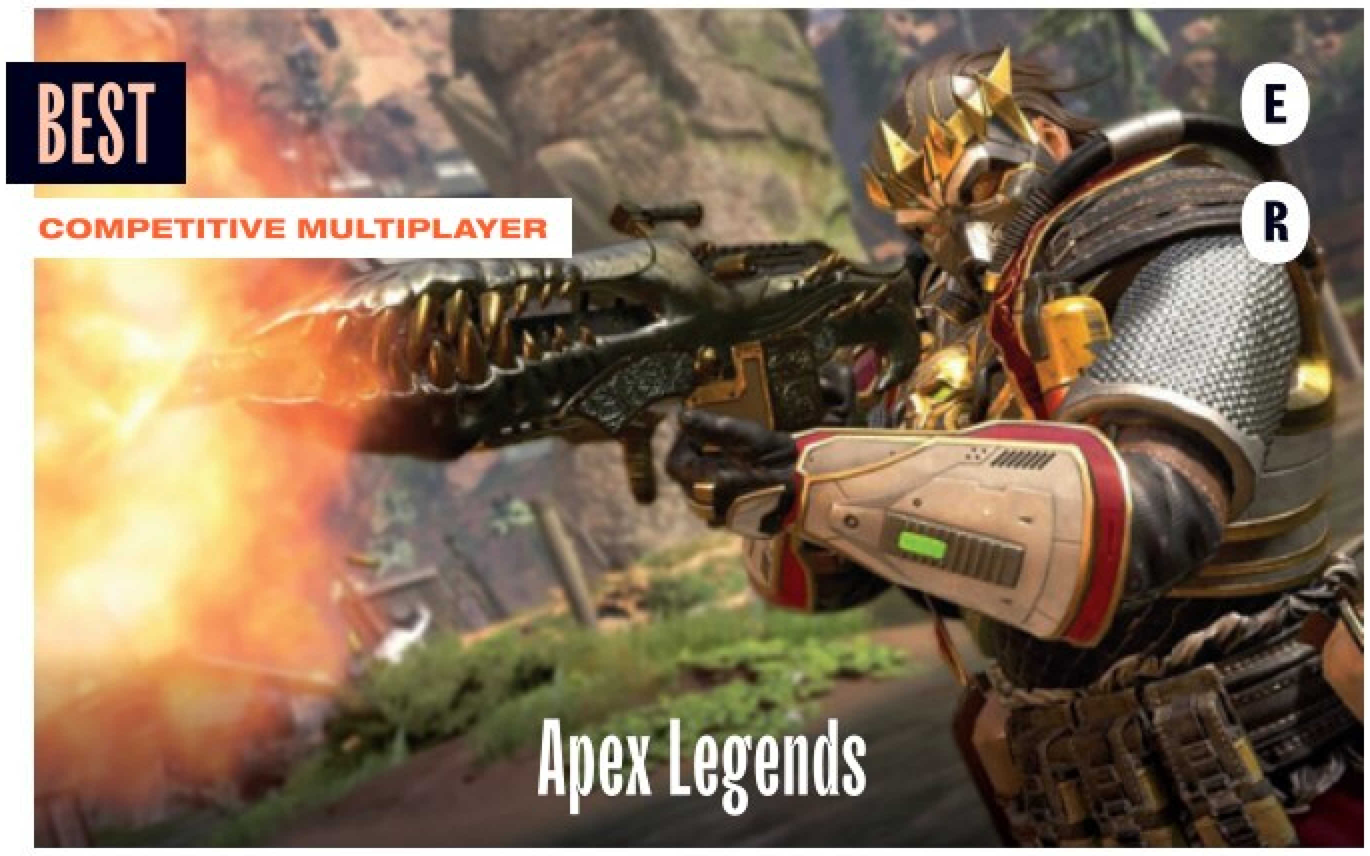
The Division 2

R

Borderlands 3

BEST

COMPETITIVE MULTIPLAYER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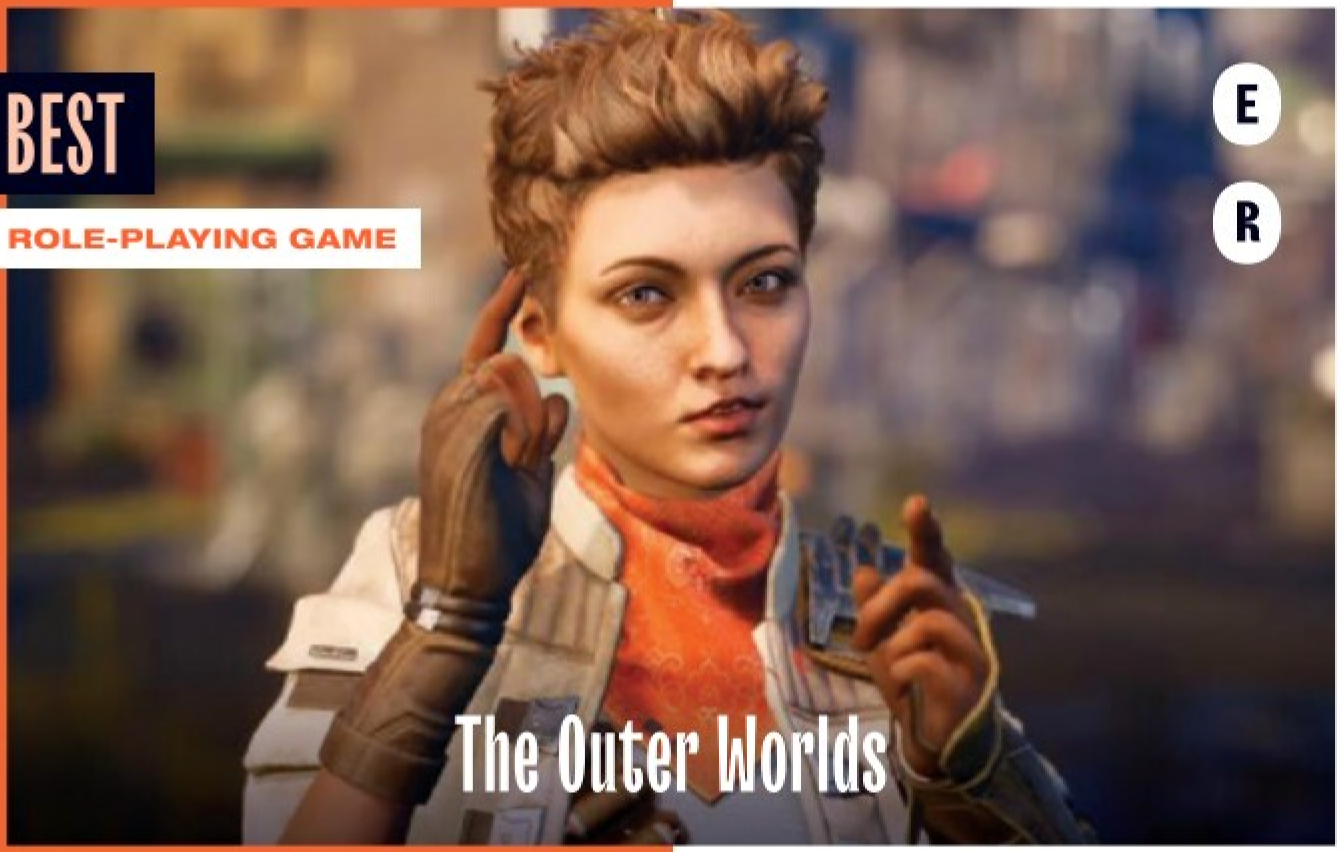
R

Apex Legends

BEST

ROLE-PLAYING GAME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The Outer Worlds

BEST

SHOOTING GAME

E

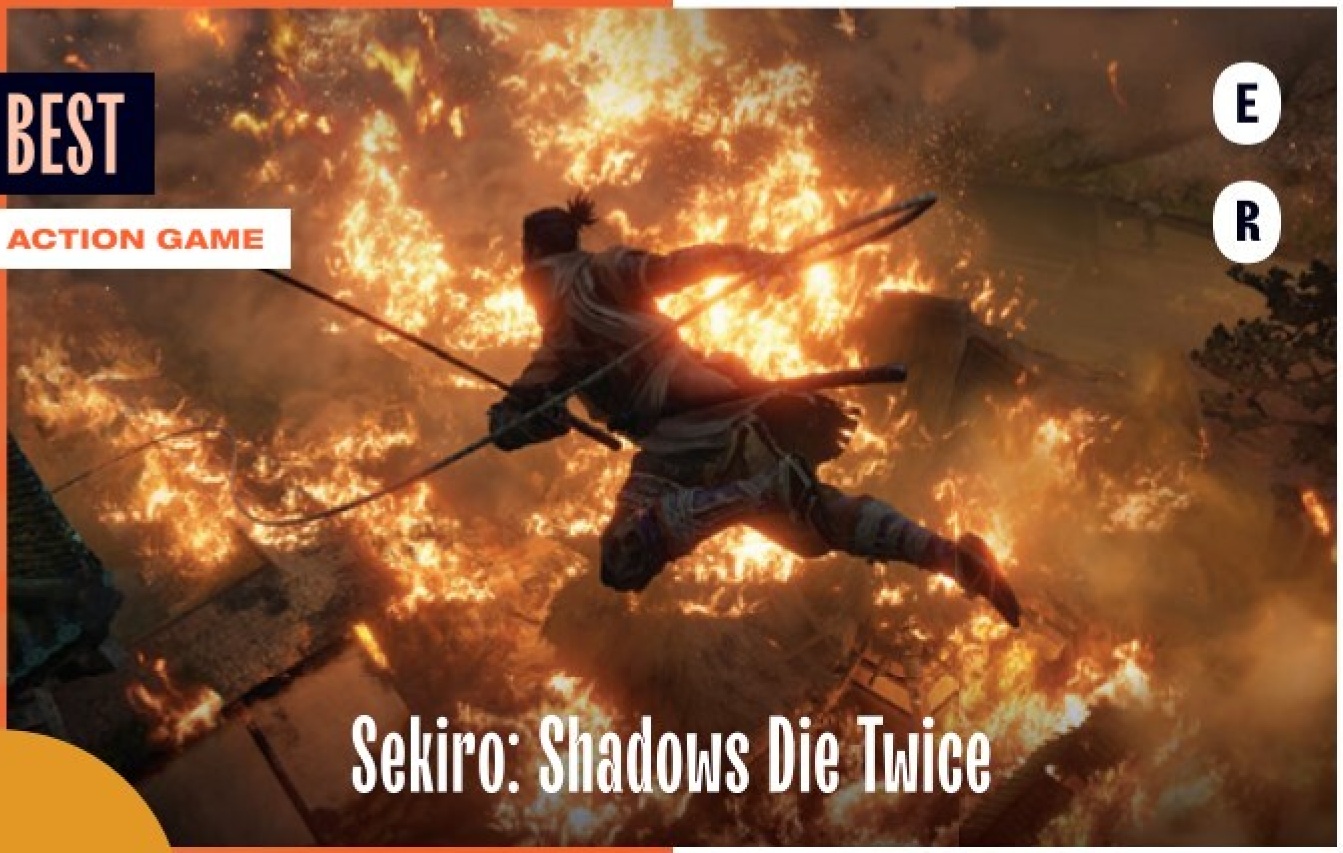
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare

R

Borderlands 3

BEST

ACTION GAME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Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice

BEST

PLATFORMING GAME

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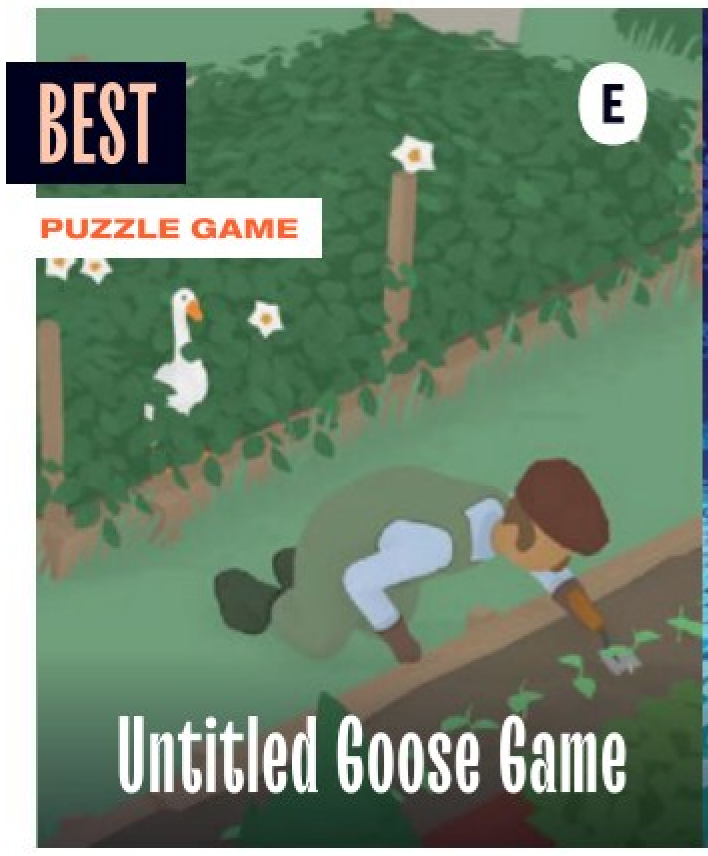
Super Mario Maker 2

BEST
ADVENTURE GAME

Life is Strange 2

BEST
PUZZLE GAME

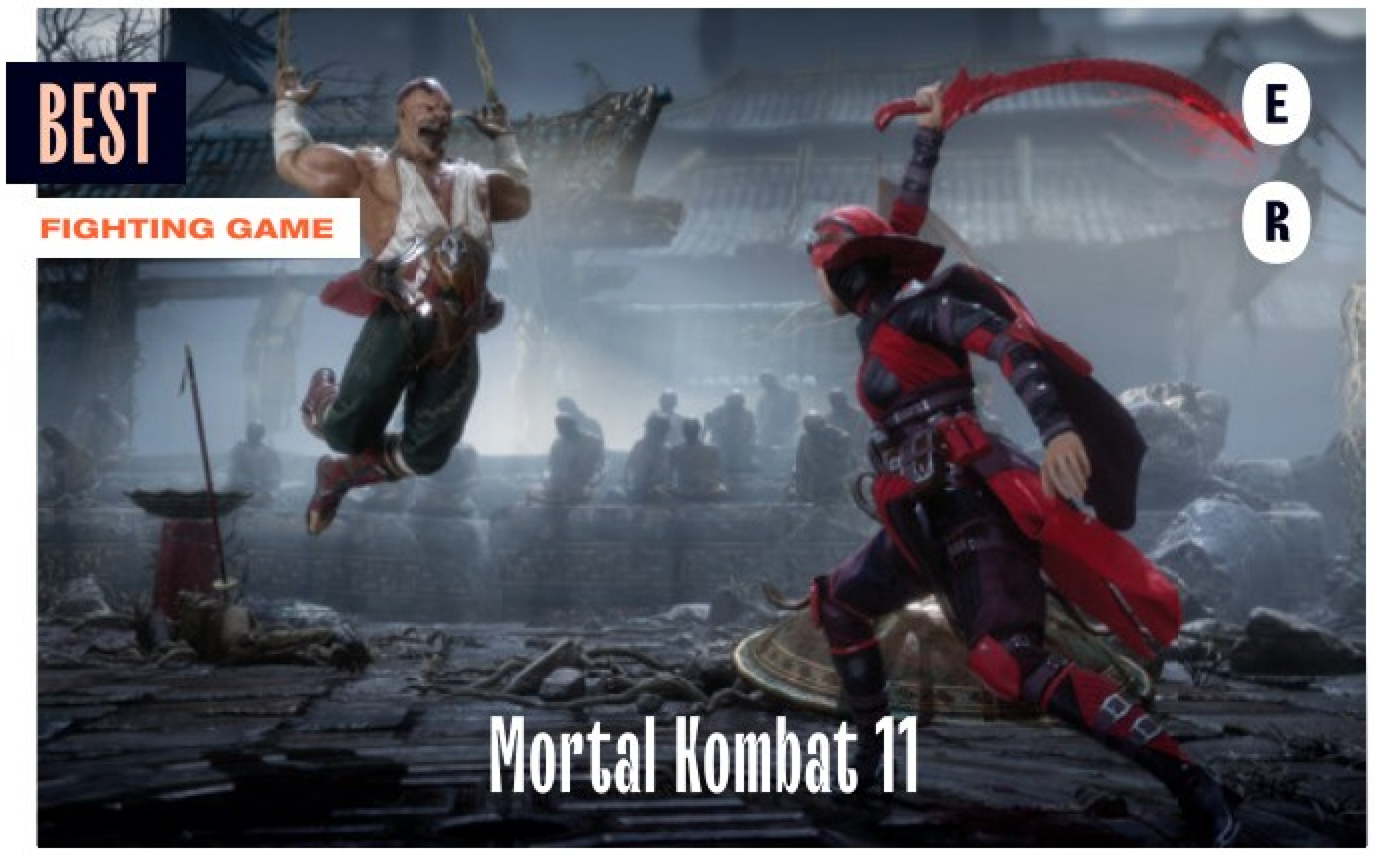


Untitled Goose Game

R
K.O.s
Randoms
Badges
Attackers
Targeting

Tetris 99

BEST
FIGHTING GAME

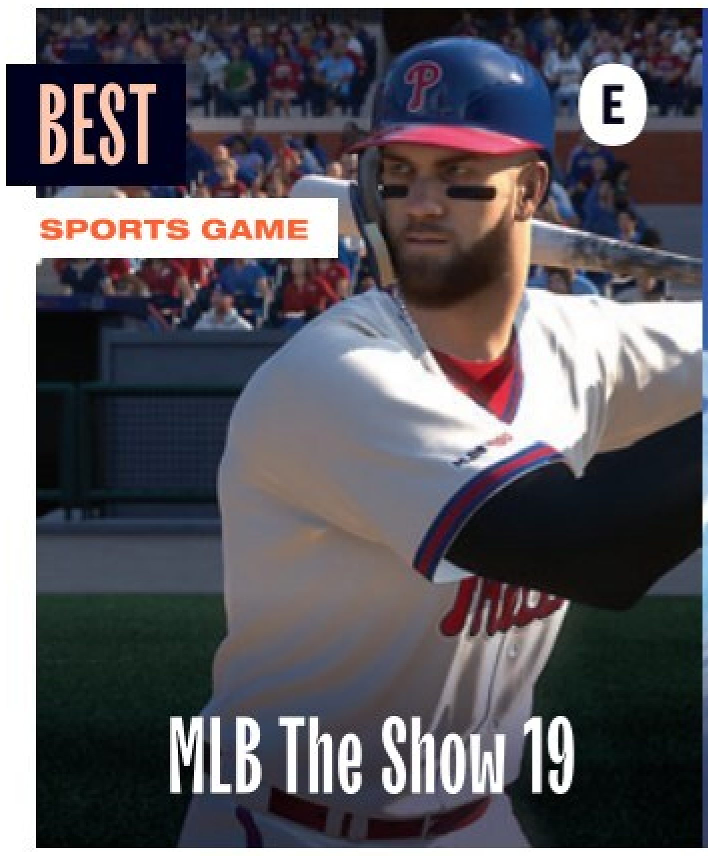


Mortal Kombat 11

BEST
MMO

Final Fantasy XIV: Shadowbringers

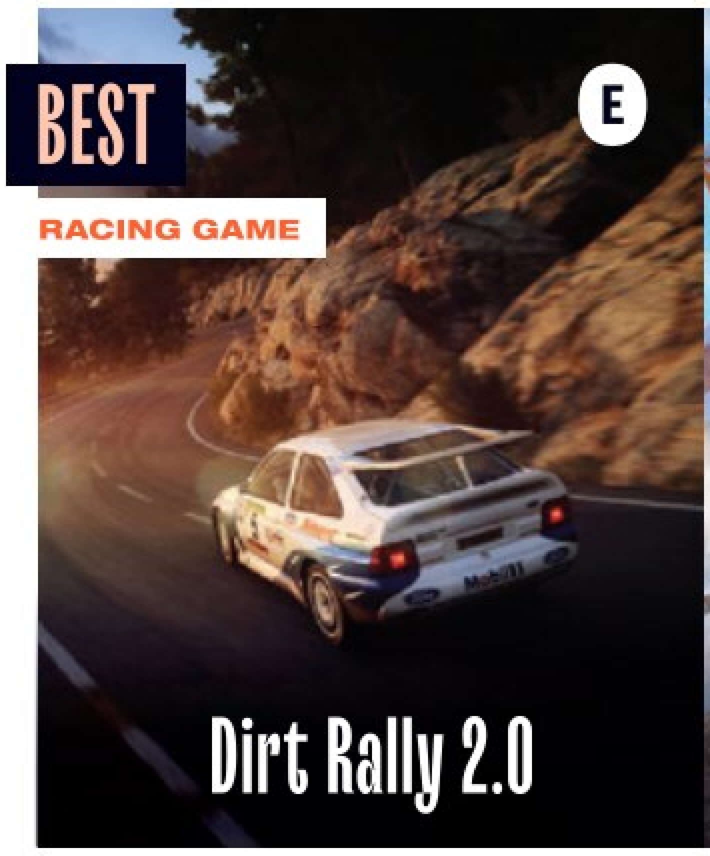
BEST
SPORTS GAME



MLB The Show 19

Mario & Sonic at the Olympic Games 2020

BEST
RACING GAME



Dirt Rally 2.0

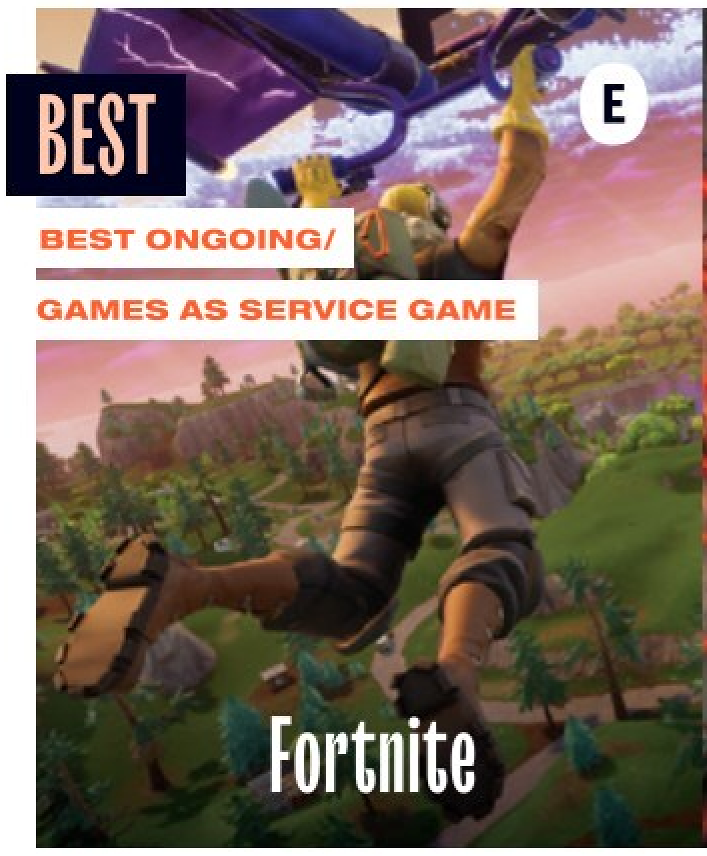
Crash Team Racing: Nitro-Fueled

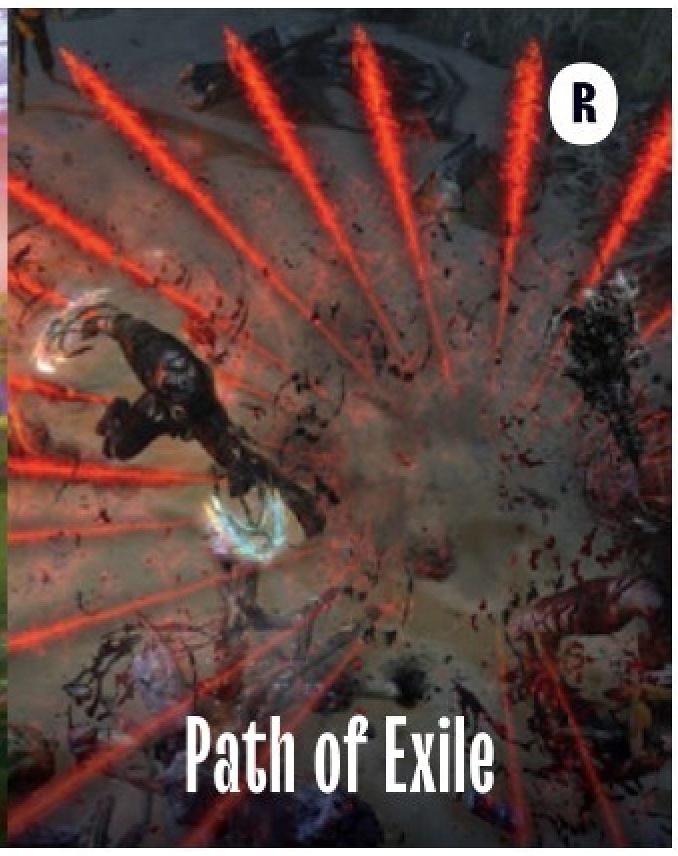
BEST
REMASTERED/REMADE GAME

Resident Evil 2

BEST

BEST ONGOING/ GAMES AS SERVICE GAME

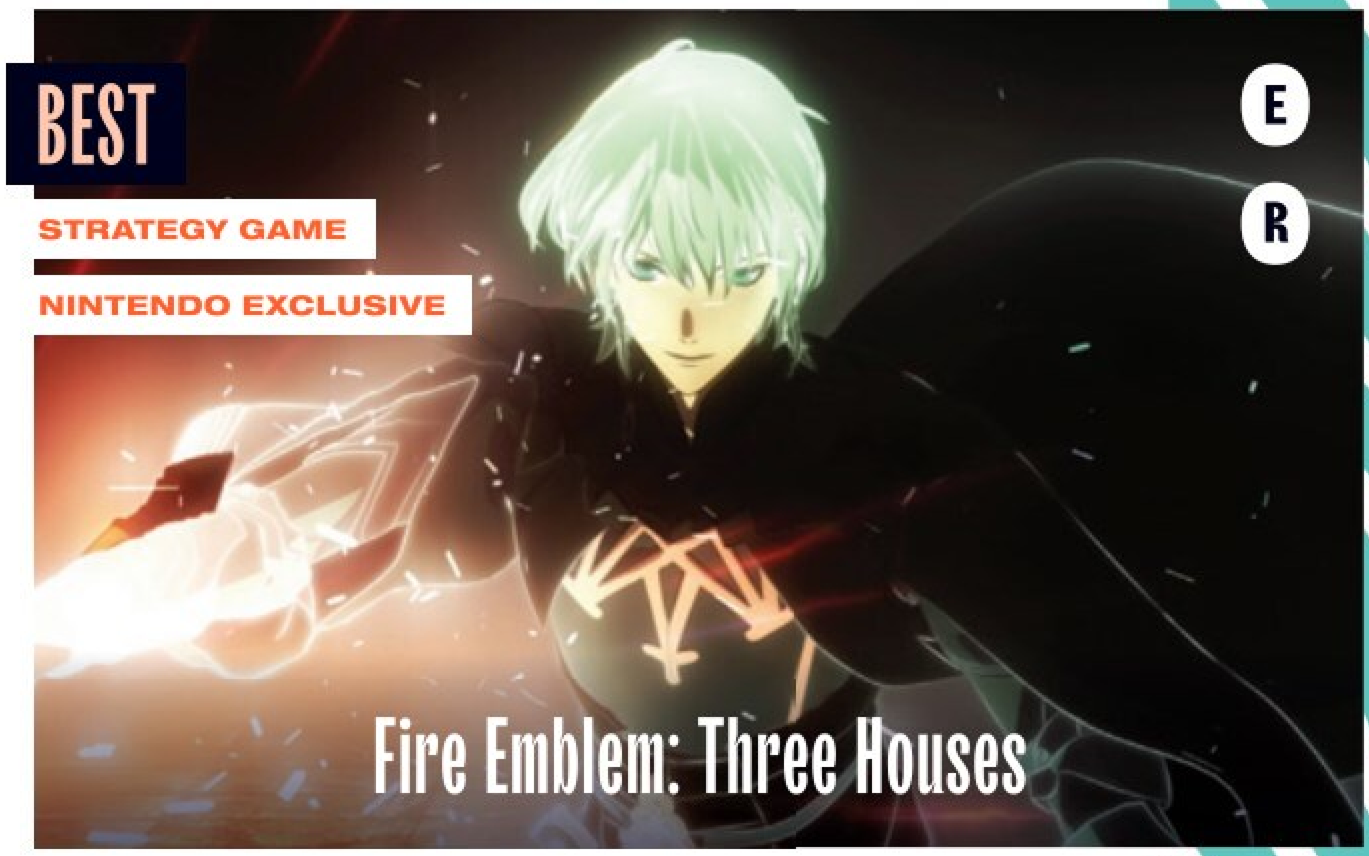

E
Fortnite


R
Path of Exile

BEST

STRATEGY GAME

NINTENDO EXCLUSIVE


E
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Fire Emblem: Three Houses

BEST

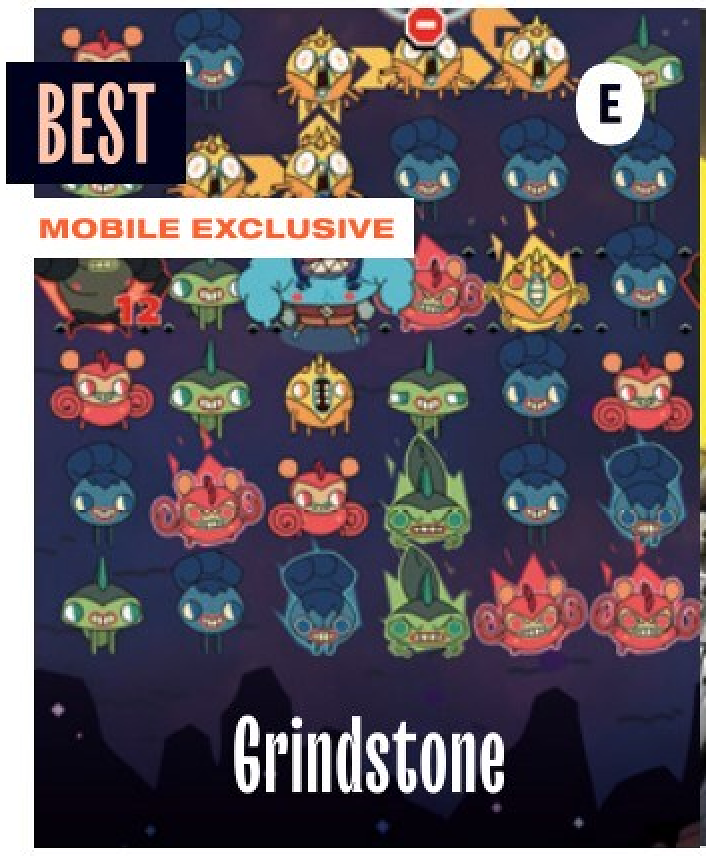
VR GAME

E
Pistol Whip

R
Ace Combat 7: Skies Unknown

BEST

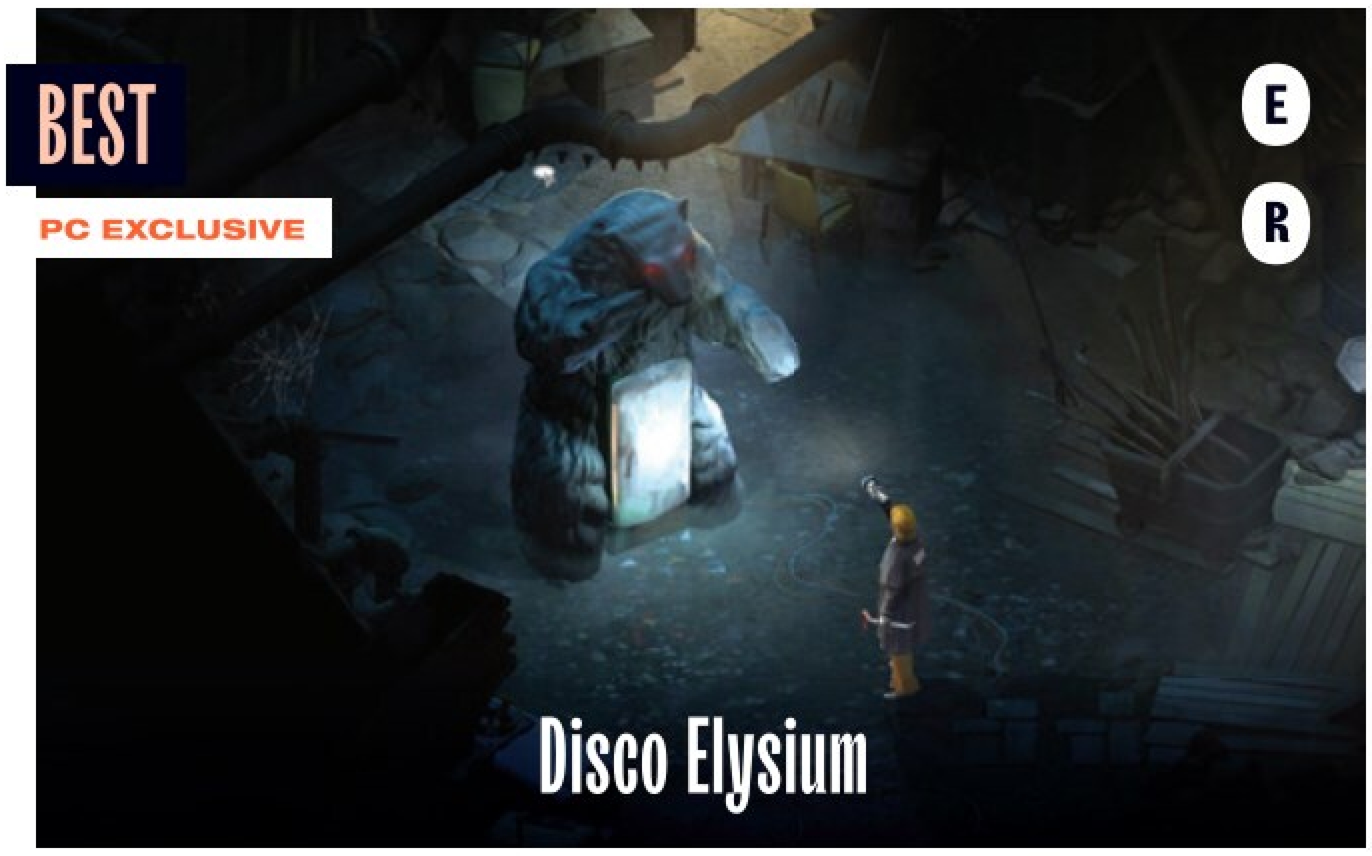
MOBILE EXCLUSIVE


E
Grindstone

R
Call of Duty: Mobile

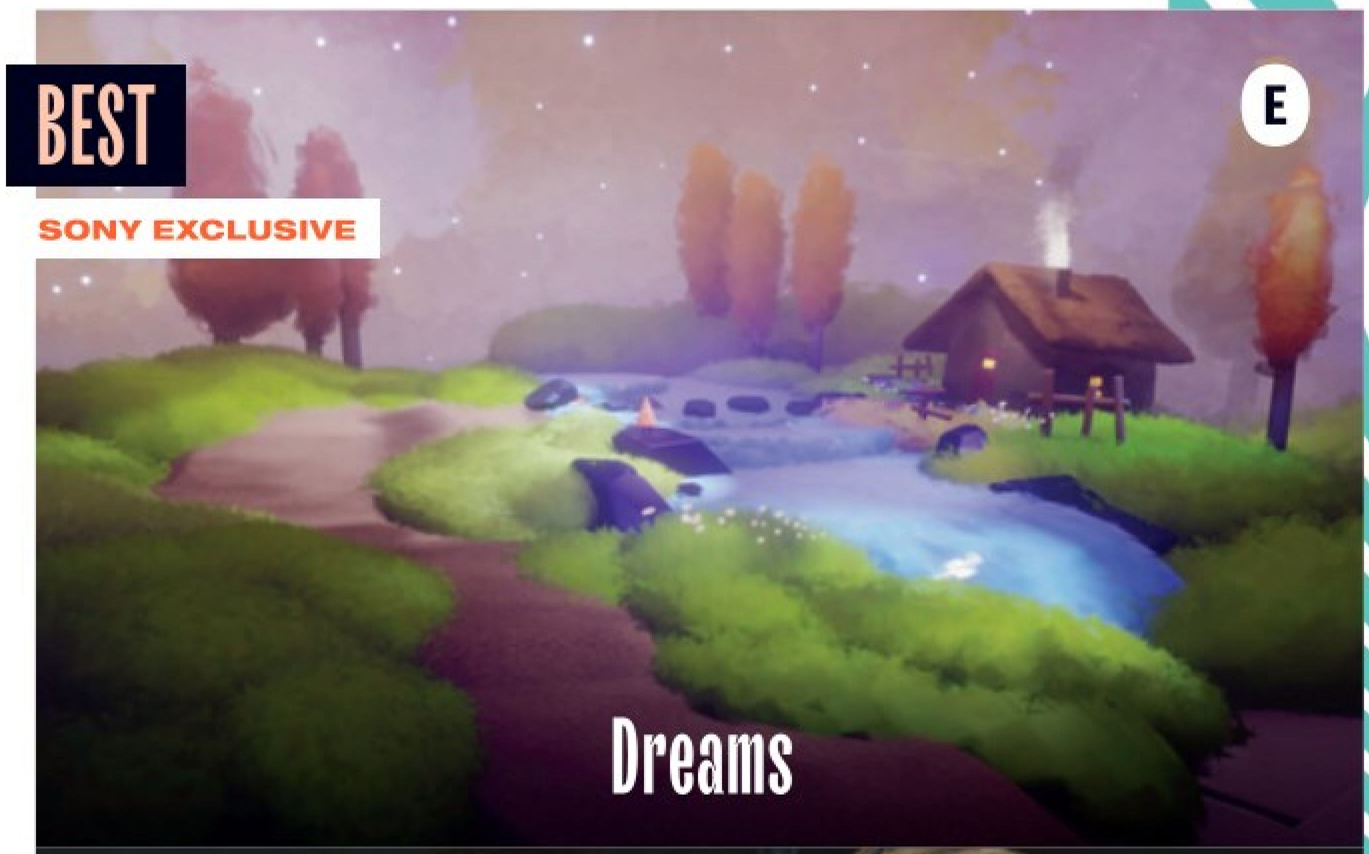
BEST

PC EXCLUSIVE


E
R
Disco Elysium

BEST

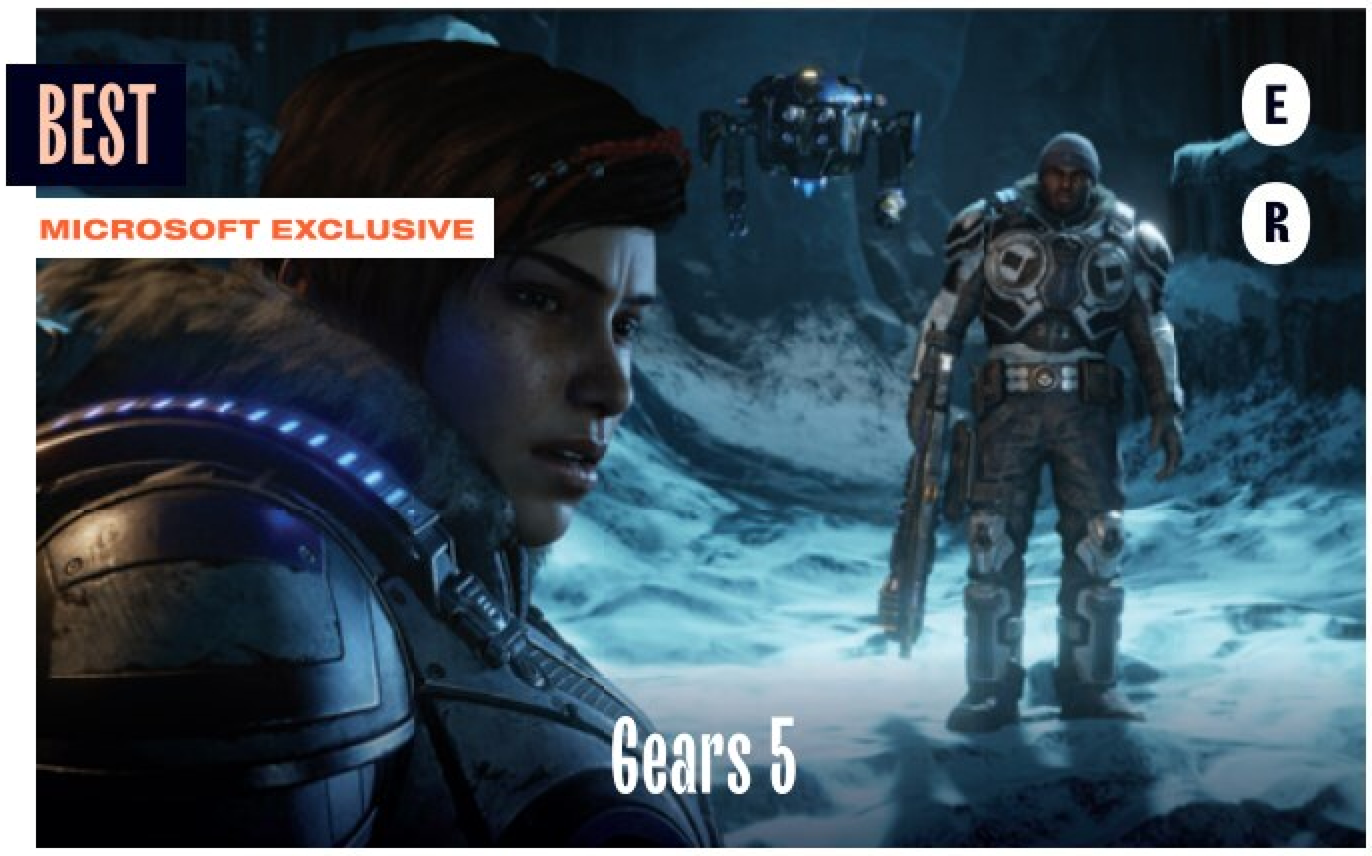
SONY EXCLUSIVE


E
Dreams

R
Death Stranding

BEST

MICROSOFT EXCLUSIVE


E
R
Gears 5

Ori And The Will Of The Wisps

Where there's a will there's a wellspring

» Platform
Xbox One • PC

» Style
1- Player Action/Platforming

» Publisher
Xbox Game Studios

» Developer
Moon Studios

» Release
March 11

Ori and the Blind Forest is a gorgeous Metroid-inspired platformer that artfully tells a heartwarming story about a young forest spirit's journey to save his homeland. That original game was one of the decade's big indie hits and fans have been eagerly awaiting the sequel for years, so when Moon Studios sat down to draft a story for that sequel, the team knew it would have to work hard to outdo themselves.

"On Blind Forest, we didn't have that many characters, but people really fell in love with them," says game director Thomas Mahler. "One of the big improvements that we wanted to make is to bring more characters into the game, so we created an area called the Wellspring Glades. When you find it, it's in ruins, but over the course of the game, you help build out that town. The NPCs who come to town fulfill some services for you, and they all have their own storylines and backgrounds."

To get a better understanding of the Wellspring Glades, we spoke with Mahler about the creatures that inhabit this new area and how they intersect with several of Ori and the Will of the Wisps' new features.

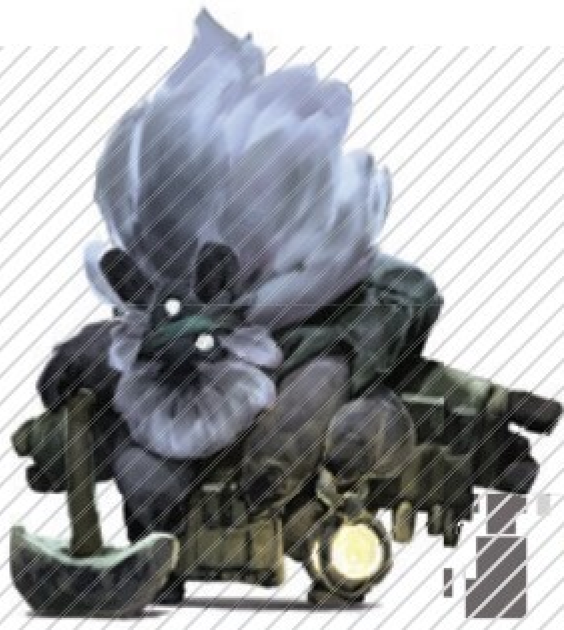
Grom is a master builder who descends from a race of creatures who were driven underground when the world fell into decay. He set off to look for a new home for his people, but Ori invites him to settle in the Wellspring Glades. Grom is the Glades' handyman, and he constructs bridges to new areas as well as other useful structures, such as a Spirit Well, which functions as a save point.

"Grom has his own separate storyline with his brother," Mahler says. "That's another thing that we wanted to prioritize: NPCs are not just there to provide services, they're also there to provide a bit of story. So, you might do a couple of quests for Grom, and then he'll open up a couple of projects to build, and then he opens up a whole new quest line and so on."

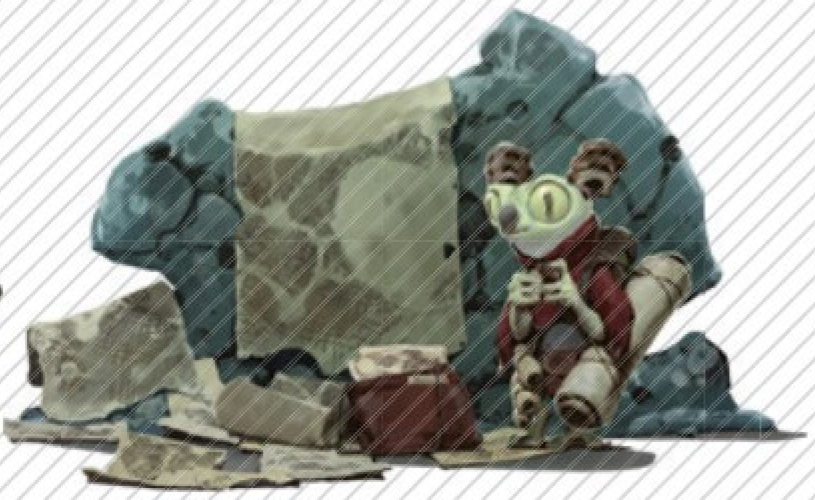
Kii is a mysterious caretaker of the forest, but Moon Studios wants to keep his background a secret for the moment. "He's a character that you discover in an area that is completely petrified," Mahler says. "He's kind of like the caretaker of one of the last living trees, but we don't want to talk too much about him because he has a special questline that we think is really neat."

Lupo is a cartography nerd. He loves maps and charts of all kinds, and has traveled across the world gathering the most interesting knowledge about the places and personalities of Ori's world. Fortunately, Lupo is willing to sell Ori some of his maps, which reveal secrets and allow players to discover other special treasures.

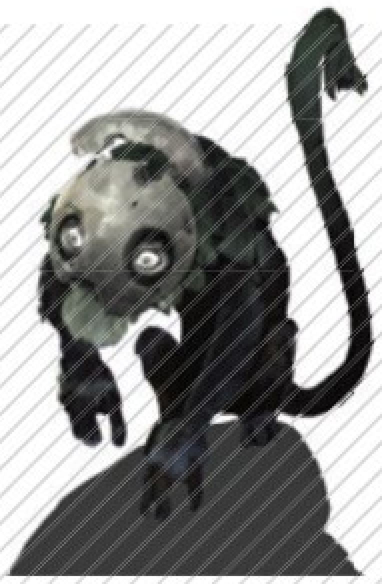
The Moki are tiny, meerkat-like critters that inhabit this world and worship artifacts left behind by humans. They tend the swamplands, helping Ori, giving him hints and pointing out



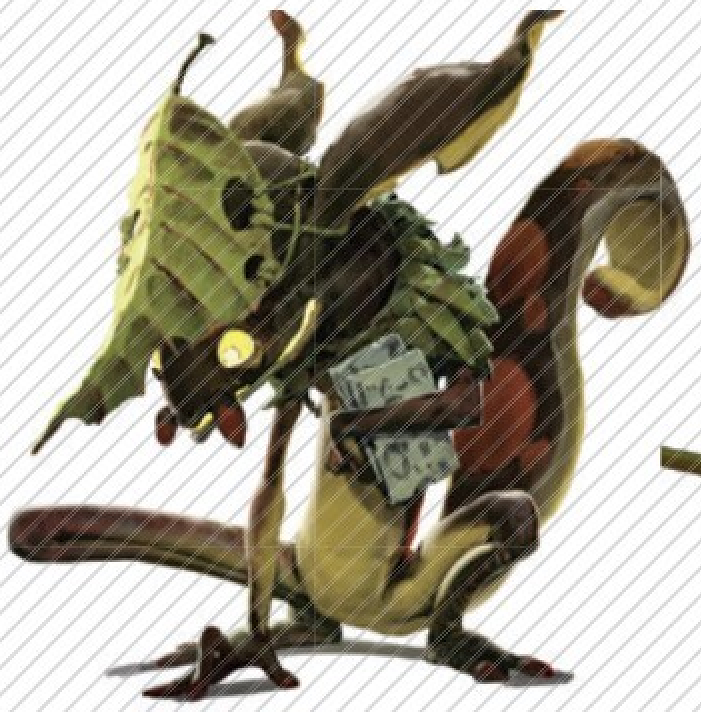
Grom



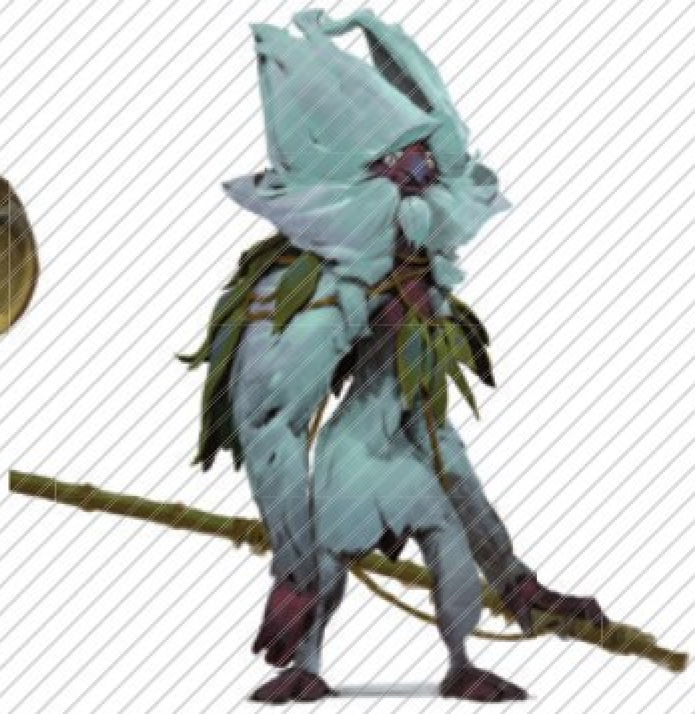
Lupo



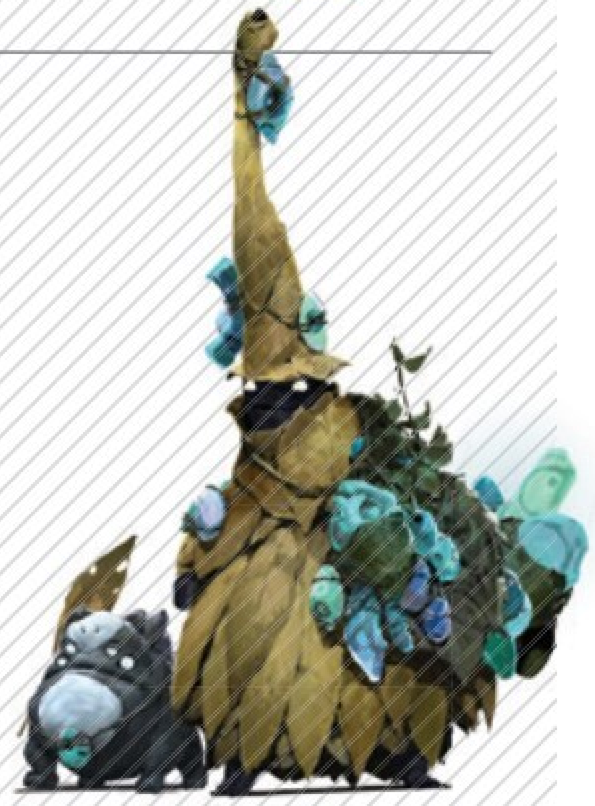
Kii



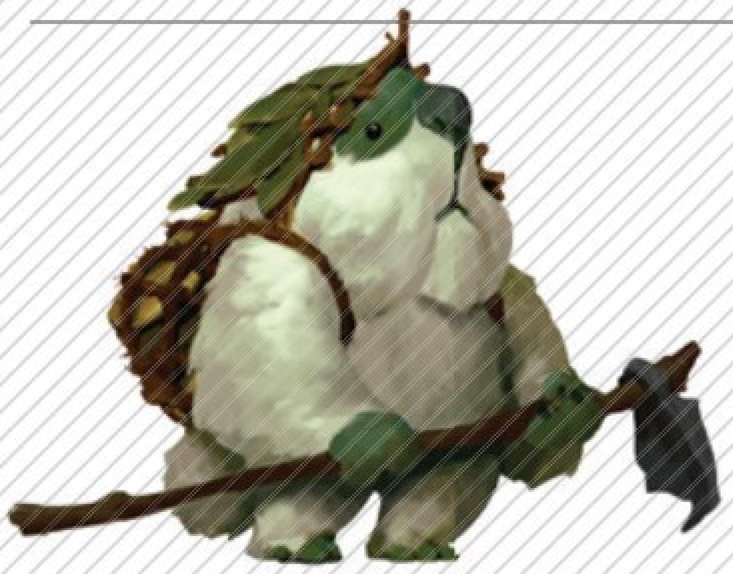
Motay



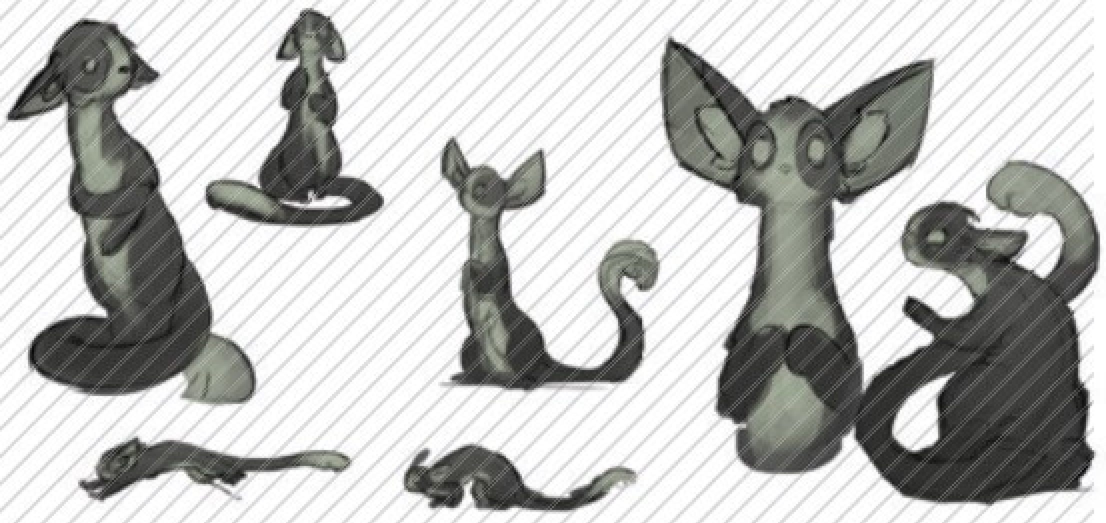
Opher



Twillen



Tuley



The Moki

special locations worth exploring.

Motay is a statistician who secretly watches everything Ori does and records those exploits for posterity. Players can talk to him to get a breakdown of all the things that have happened throughout the game. "He's kind of like this stalker character," Mahler says. "We wanted players to have a way to see all their statistics, but we wanted to go crazy a little bit with that and show you things like how many times you jump, how many times you kill this or that enemy, or how much spirit life you gain throughout the game. So instead of just having a menu – which we've thought was a little bit dry – Motay just shows you the stuff from his notebook."

Opher is a creature of action. He is a true weapons master who is eager to share his combat knowledge with Ori. In Will of the Wisps, Ori has access to a wider array of weapons. For example, the Spirit Edge is a sword that is ideal for quick, close-range attacks. However, Ori also has access to hammer weapons, which move slower but do more damage. Meanwhile, Spirit Arc projectiles function much like a bow and arrow. Opher helps Ori upgrade these weapons throughout the game.

"We want that super satisfying feeling of upgrading your sword and getting different effects," Mahler says. "Opher is basically doing all of that for you. He's this almost truthful monkey who has a lot to teach Ori … For example, you learn this charge move from him, so you can actually charge up your weapons for a big attack."

Tuley is obsessed with gardening. Like most of Wellspring Glades' inhabitants, you first encounter him out in the world and convince him to move to the Glades. Once you do, he employs his green thumb to beautify your home base. "Throughout the game, you find seeds to bring to him, and with these seeds he will then make the Wellspring Glades a little nicer," Mahler says. "He'll let you access new areas with plants that you actually use for platforming, which opens up the Wellspring Glades for further exploration."

Twillen is a shard trader. In Will of the Wisps, players find shards, which Ori can equip to augment his abilities. For example, players can use shards to buff Ori's attacks, boost his health, and point him toward his next objective. Players find shards throughout the world and in hidden areas, but they can also purchase and trade shards with Twillen.

"We designed the game so that by the time you're finished, you will not have enough spirit light to have everything," Mahler says. "We wanted to have this almost Diablo experience, where you play through the game with one loadout, and then, when you replay the game you're choosing something different, you're picking different shards to buy and your game feels really different." » **Ben Reeves**

Journey To The Savage Planet

Don't let the fourth-best designation scare you off

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action
(2-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
505 Games

» **Developer**
Typhoon Studios

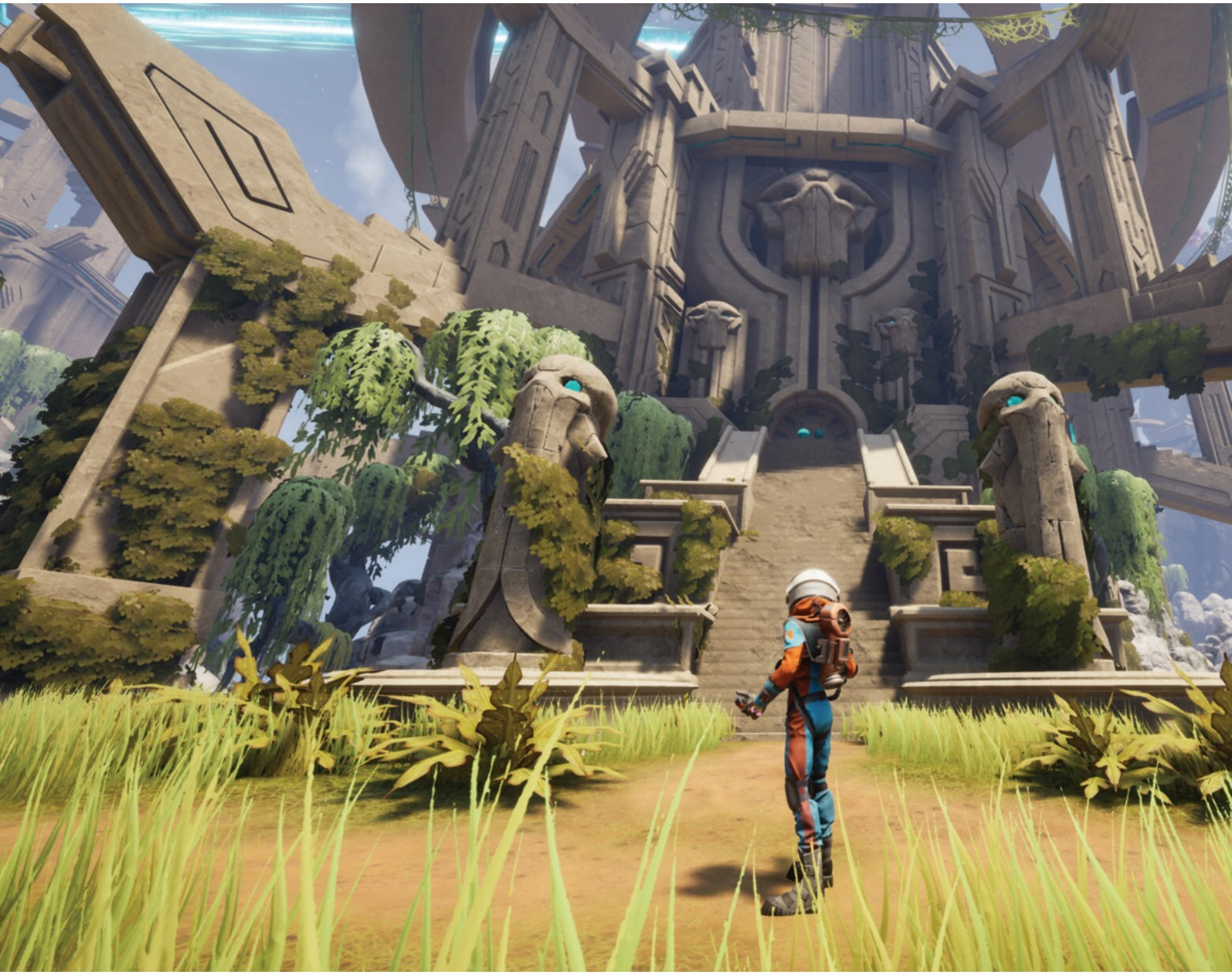
» **Release**
January 28

I've courted death many times on this hostile planet, but my astronaut's journey is ultimately cut short by a giant, angry frog. Fortunately, my encounter with the reaper is only a fleeting introduction. My bosses at Kindred Aerospace seem to have found a way to cheat death – not bad for being the fourth-best space-exploration outfit in the galaxy. My newly manufactured body emerges from my landing craft's 3D printer, and I head back out to give it another shot. And hopefully, these shots hit their mark.

My battle with that frog may not have initially gone as I'd hoped, but the encounter is a great refresher on Journey to the Savage Planet and what Typhoon Studios is hoping to accomplish with its debut release. First, it highlights the visuals, which refreshingly draw from a wide array of bright colors. "We wanted to have a game that was bright and happy and welcoming and not oppressive and negative and dark," says creative director and studio founder Alex Hutchinson. Simultaneously, Hutchinson says the team wanted to deliver a comedic game. "If you set up situations where the player can screw themselves over or do strange things, could they be involved in their own comedy?"

I get a sense of that kind of comedy when I bring my newly reformed body back to the site of my earlier demise. There, near the frog, is my old corpse. It's hugging itself in a sad fetal pose, and I'm given a prompt to bury it when I get close to it. I do so, and the screen darkens while the text, "Shamefully burying your body" appears onscreen. The body is then replaced with a high-tech obelisk, which displays the number of times I've died since playing the demo. I look back at the frog and initiate battle again, determined not to add another tick to any gravestone's counter. Especially not to an enemy that's named "Slamphibian."

In my defense, Hutchinson is in our office showing off late-game content,



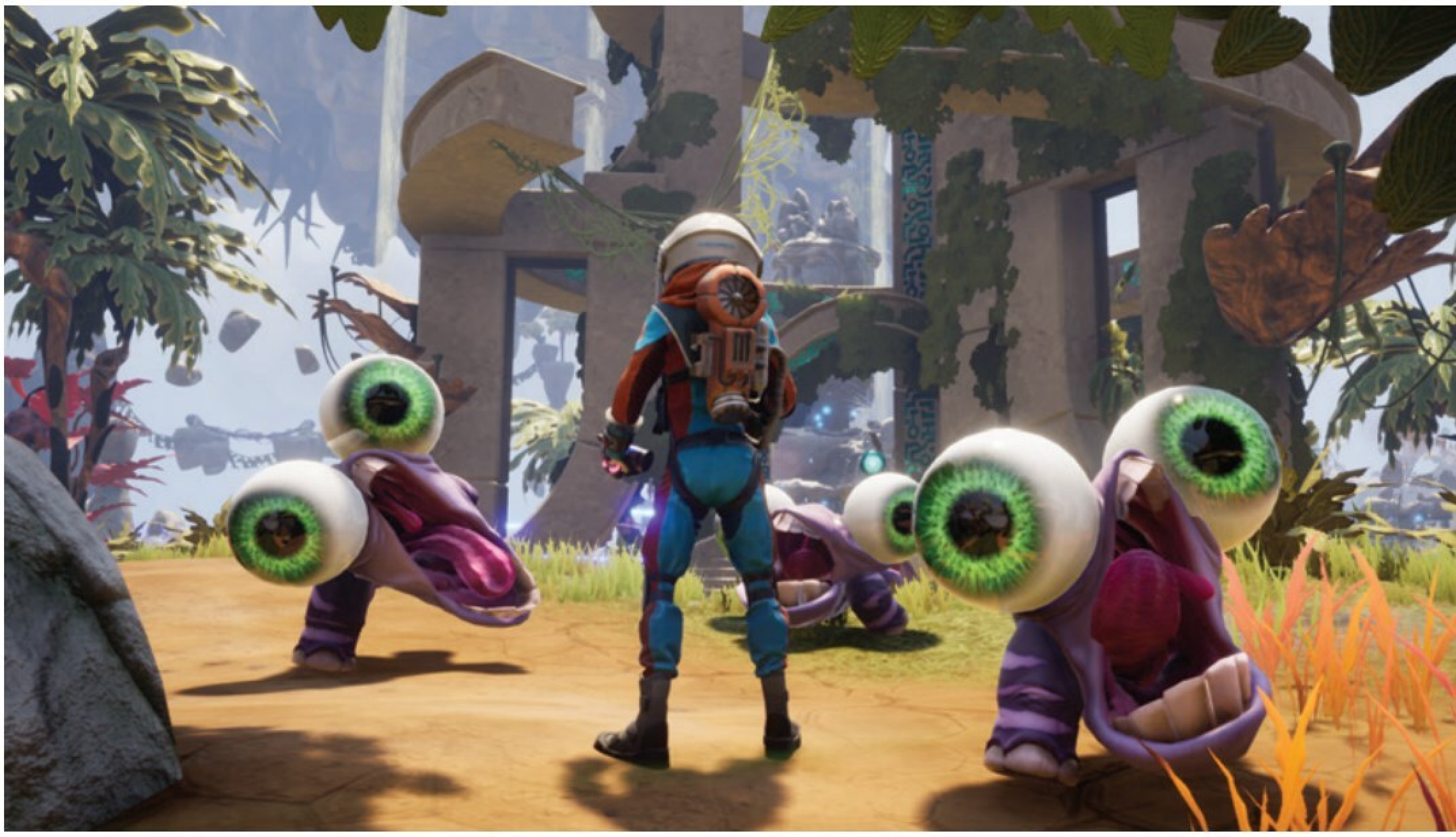
which includes a newly revealed third biome. Slamphibian is apparently one of the game's more difficult foes, which is appropriate considering his environment. The previous two areas Hutchinson showed were more contiguous and, well, planet-like than this place. Here, solid ground has given way to an abundance of floating islands and rock formations, which make getting from place to place a challenge. Fortunately, my astronaut's kit includes a grapple-like tether that lets me whip onto special points and swing between them. A few environmental puzzles have me toss quick-growing seeds onto highlighted spots, which let me place my own grapple spots, too. I ask about this zone and how it doesn't feel particularly like a planet, and Hutchinson says that there is indeed a reason for its strange nature, which players will learn.

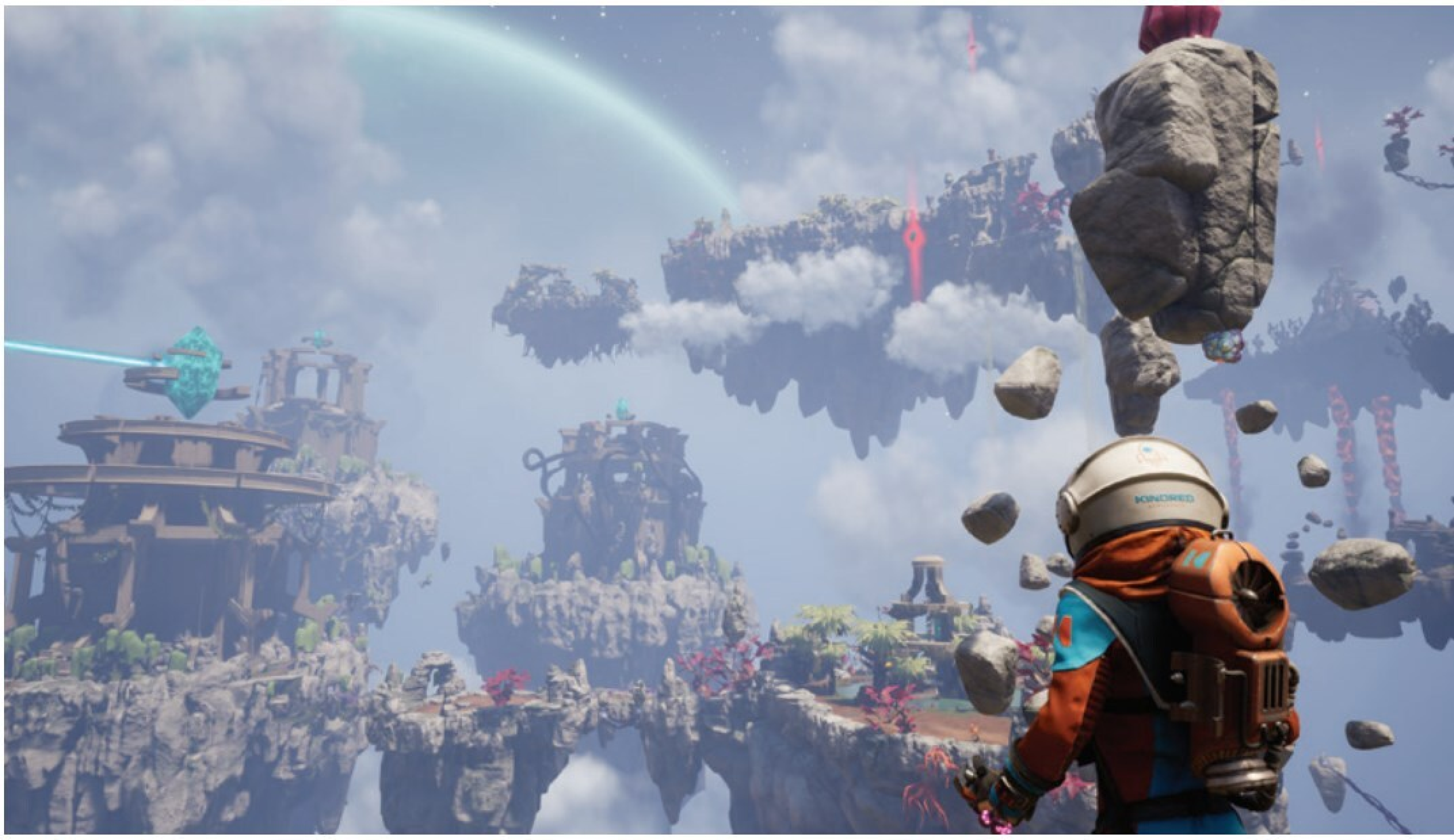
That sense of unfamiliarity extends to the overall universe that Journey to the Savage Planet is set in, too. When you respawn or visit your landing craft, you'll be able to watch a variety of live-action TV commercials for strange products such as a foodstuff called Grob or an erotic phone service for blobs. They all give off a distinct Tim and Eric vibe, which I love; your mileage may vary. Those are interspersed with messages from your boss, Kindred CEO Martin Tweed, who is taking more and more of an interest in your planet. More specifically, he's interested in the strange tower that juts from the surface of the location, which was previously assumed to be uninhabited.

I don't get to see what's inside the main tower during my session, but I am able to investigate a smaller area that will eventually – hopefully – open the doors to the place. After upgrading my boots to perform an aerial stomp attack, I'm able to restart some previously idle machinery. Once it's back online, things get a little hairy. The cylindrical room fills with rising lava as I hop my way into safety. The tricky platforming is made a bit easier thanks to my ability to double-jump. Hutchinson says players can eventually upgrade to a quadruple jump, which seems as though it would make this particular challenge fairly trivial.

Even with rising lava and hostile monsters, Typhoon Studios isn't trying to punish players every step of the way. Scanning environments for scientific discoveries and exploring new spaces is a big part of the mission, and there are long stretches of quiet contemplation. Even if those moments are interrupted by beefy frogs, there's a nice overall vibe of discovery throughout the game. You'll be able to see for yourself in just a few weeks.

» **Jeff Cork**





Resident Evil 3

Returning to the scene of the outbreak

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1- Player Action
(5-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Capcom

» **Developer**
Capcom

» **Release**
April 3

Fans haven't even waited a full year since the release of the Resident Evil 2 remake, but like an infected survivor running from a flesh-eating mob, Capcom won't slow down. The studio has announced a remake of the PlayStation classic Resident Evil 3: Nemesis, which is set for release this spring. This newest remake looks to bring many of the innovations from last year's release into one of the most overlooked entries in the series.

The original Resident Evil 3 began as a spinoff side story following series mainstay Jill Valentine as she raced to chase down a cure during the deadly Raccoon City outbreak. Set roughly around the same timeframe as RE 2, RE 3 revisited iconic locals such as the police station while also giving fans a larger area of the city to explore. This remake looks to replicate that experience. During the announce trailer, Jill sprints through an abandoned apartment building, a garage, and a hospital. Jill also has to navigate more of Raccoon City's desolated city streets, which have become death traps full of police barricades, abandoned cars, and shambling undead corpses.

Much like the original, Jill's journey is even harder thanks to the tireless pursuit of the Nemesis. This hulking bioweapon was created inside Umbrella's demented labs with the express purpose of hunting down the members of Jill's S.T.A.R.S. squad. Similar to Mr. X from Resident Evil 2, Nemesis stalks Jill from one location to the next, smashing through walls as he doggedly pursues his targets. Unfortunately, our heroine might not last long in a one-on-one fight, so she may need to run or hide whenever this beast catches her scent. In fact, Nemesis might be even deadlier than Mr. X because the Nemesis has access to an arsenal of high-powered weapons and may dodge some of Jill's attacks.

This Resident Evil 3 remake also comes bundled with the Resident Evil Resistance multiplayer mode. Previously announced during the Tokyo Game Show as Project Resistance, this new asymmetrical multiplayer experience lets players participate in declassified Umbrella experiments, which took place on the outskirts of Raccoon City. In this mode, four participants battle to survive the machinations of a single mastermind who orchestrates the experiment from the comfort of a control room, unleashing various Umbrella monstrosities on the hapless civilians.

Resident Evil 3: Nemesis is regarded as a less-significant entry in the franchise, but it actually introduced several notable features such as a dodge mechanic, a 180-degree quick turn, and the ability to craft new ammo from gunpowder. Nemesis started the series' slow migration toward more action-focused horror, so we're excited to see how Capcom takes some of its old ideas and blends them with Resident Evil's current formula. Fortunately, fans only have to wait until April to make this return trip to Raccoon City. » **Ben Reeves**

OTEL
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POLICE

Wildermyth

Storybook strategy

Wildermyth is not the game I thought it was. First glance suggests a charming papercraft presentation of grid-based strategy battles in a whimsical fantasy setting. And while that's certainly one part of the ambitious project, Worldwalker is crafting a rich layer of role-playing, narrative, and exploration to accompany the turn-based battles. The resulting adventure is rife with potential, and has left me deeply curious to see the full game come to fruition.

Currently available in Steam Early Access, a game of Wildermyth begins with the creation of an initial party. Whether in this initial selection, or with the subsequent heroes that you recruit into your squad, individuals can be randomized for both combat specialty and guiding personality traits. A romantic warrior features different dialogue and events when compared to a sarcastic mystic, who in turn differs from a hotheaded hunter. Each character develops independently, both through looted equipment and unique perks that shape their playstyle as they level. The most fascinating feature here is how in-game story choices (often brought to light by your chosen personality traits) change the relationships between the party members in your control. Within an hour of playtime, my initial party included a complicated love triangle and two heroes who had become frustrated rivals with one another.

Those dynamics and events play out through storybook-style comic strips that interconnect the major moments of the unfolding campaign. Rush into the burning house, or move more carefully? Flirt with a party member, or keep things professional? Go down fighting after a grievous wound to help your friends, or withdraw and potentially return later having been indelibly changed by your injury? These procedurally generated events shape the unfolding story of your team, and often result in permanent gameplay effects on your characters.

As a campaign progresses, you expand across an ever-growing map, scouting new zones and uncovering potential outposts to inhabit – but only if you first clear out the monsters that dwell within. Your party is constantly growing and changing, and you'll often split the group to accomplish separate tasks, before gathering together to tackle a challenging combat scenario. One hero might be back at town training a new recruit, another scouting a haunted forest, and a third holding down that tower liberated in an earlier battle.

When combat begins, the grid-based encounters borrow liberally from the likes of XCOM and D&D miniature combat. Positional advantage is a major factor, as adjacent heroes gain defensive wall benefits, and flanking offers valuable advantages. A fascinating magic system called interfusion lets your mystics take control of objects on the battlefield (like tables, anvils, or rubble piles) and enact powerful magical effects and explosions, even from the other side of a wall. The creative monster designs consistently surprise, and in a clever twist, the monster types you fight gain new evolutionary advantages after every battle, ensuring your next encounter features new twists.

Wildermyth is a deeper and more complex game than I first guessed. I'm often suspicious of procedural generation, but the emergent storytelling and battles in the early hours of Wildermyth impressed me. If the developers can maintain the same breadth of branching gameplay and drama beyond the early hours I played, this absorbing twist on strategy/RPGs could be an impressive addition to the genre.

» **Matt Miller**

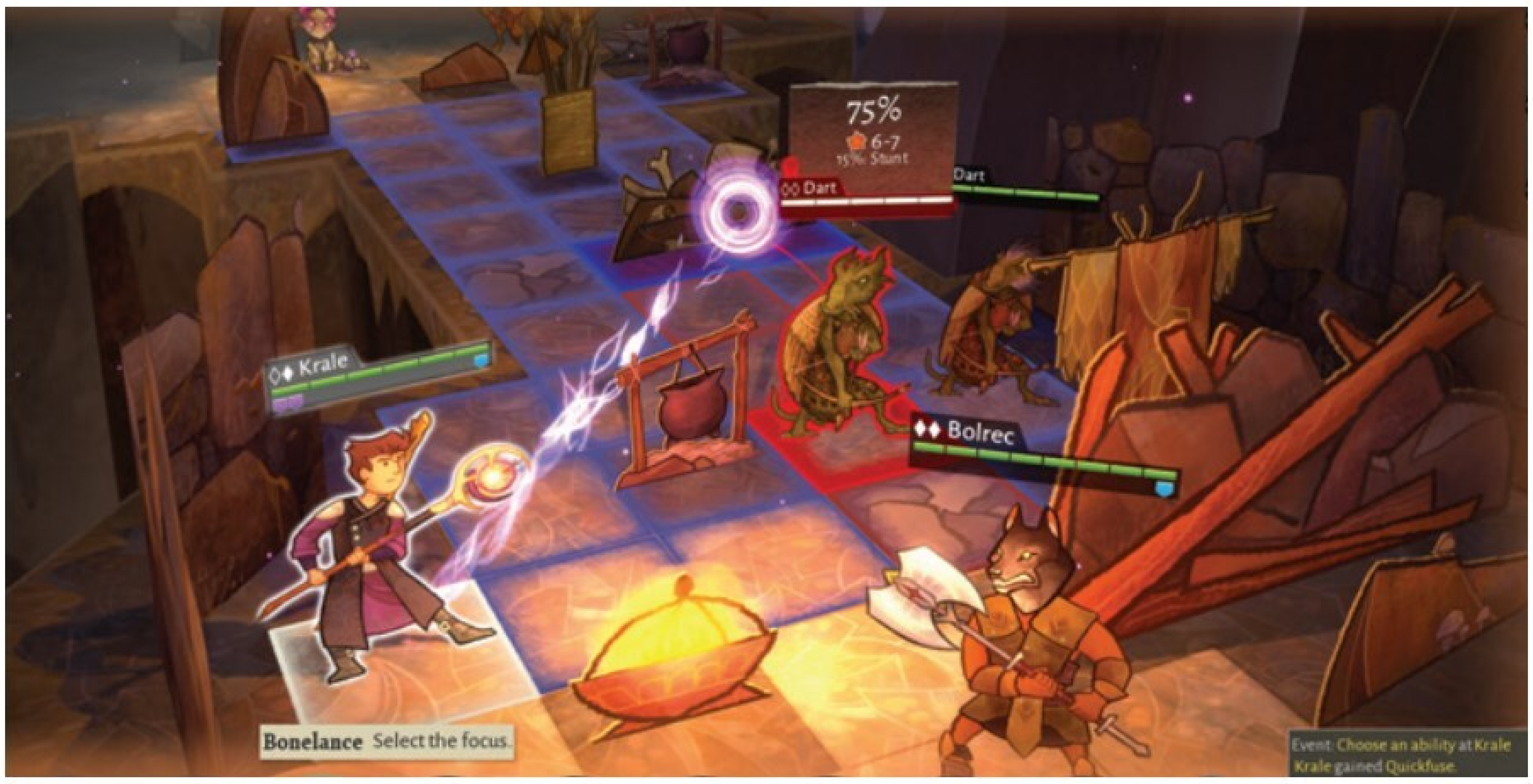
» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy/Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Worldwalker Games

» **Developer**
Worldwalker Games

» **Release**
TBA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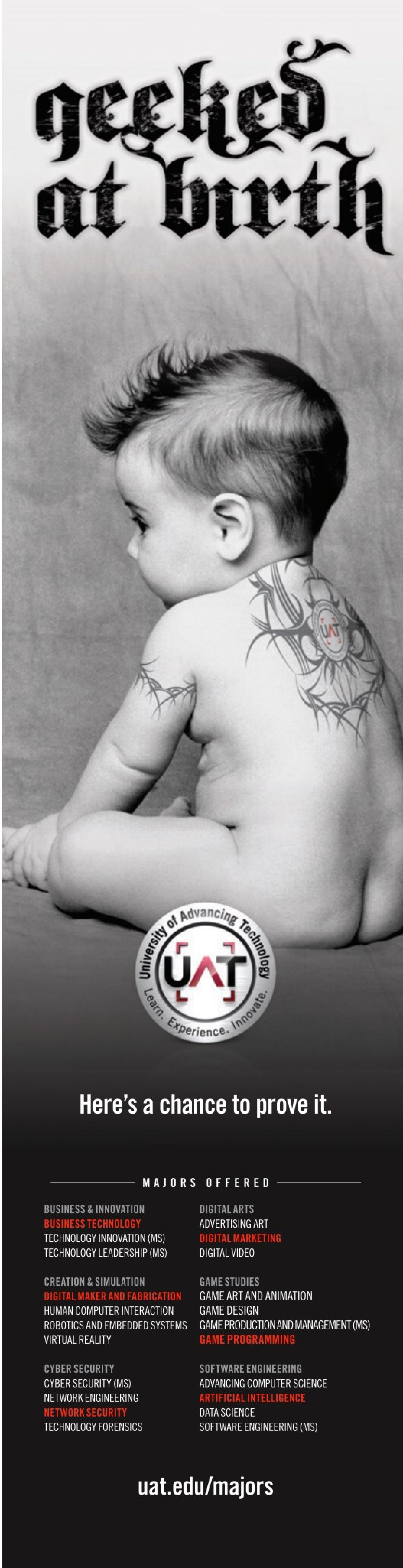
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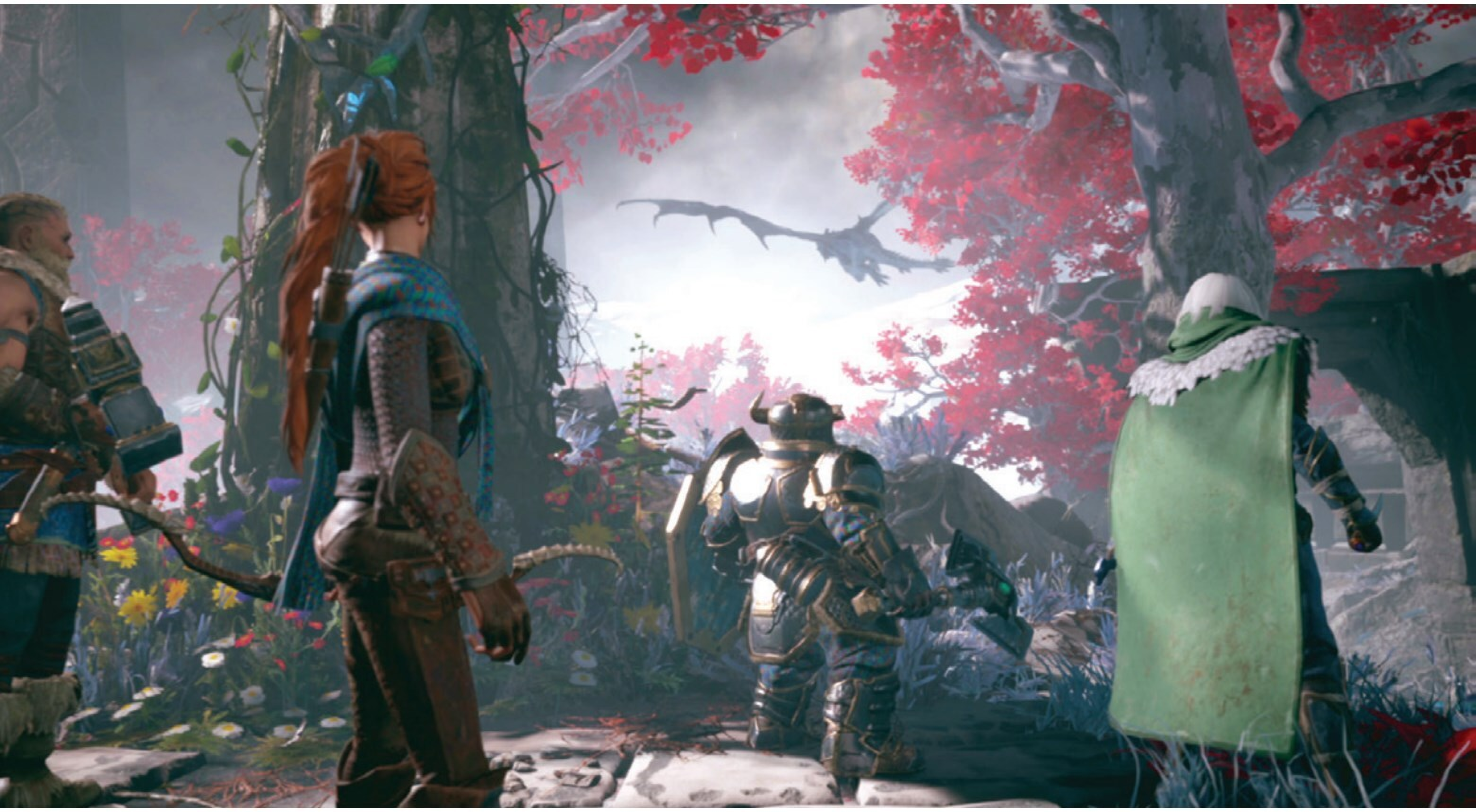
Dark Alliance

A return to form



» Platform
Consoles (TBA) • PC

» Style
1 to 4-Player Action/Role-Playing (4-Player Online)

» Publisher
Wizards of the Coast

» Developer
Tuque Games

» Release
2020

Way back in 2001, the original Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance spun up an action-focused twist on the familiar Forgotten Realms D&D world, and acted as a gateway for console players to enjoy the kind of isometric cooperative fantasy gameplay their PC-playing friends enjoyed with Diablo. Years after that release, Dark Alliance is returning, with the same focus on cooperative play, but with hopes to modernize the style for a new generation of players.

The Dungeons & Dragons game and fiction has seen tremendous growth in recent years, and few characters are such staples of that fiction as the drow named Drizzt Do'Urden, and his companions: Wulfgar, Cattie-brie, and Bruenor. Those four characters take center stage in Dark Alliance as the playable heroes; teamwork is a big focus of gameplay, with everyone working together to bring down big foes. "They each have their own unique weaponry, move-sets, fighting style, and varied play style that fits with who they are as a character," says Kevin Neibert, lead game designer at Tuque Games. "There are some cool combinations where a player can open up a monster to make them vulnerable to attacks from allies, and it feels like an alley-oop in basketball."

While a tabletop session of D&D is far more than combat, it's that aspect of the game that the Dark Alliance games have always relished in, and it appears the same is true again with this new installment. "We like to say that when you play Dark Alliance, it feels as though your DM just said, 'Roll for initiative,'" Neibert says. "We want to capture the action phase of D&D combat." Multiple editions of the tabletop game have come and gone since the original video game, and Tuque is looking to the latest 5th edition for inspiration. "The original Dark Alliance games helped get so many people into D&D, and we plan to do the same," Neibert says.

No action/RPG is complete without a robust approach to character improvement and gearing up. "Each character will have its own set of goals to accomplish that will help them level up and get gear specific to that character," Neibert says. "Players can power up their hero by leveling up and collecting loot while completing quests." It's heartening to hear that characters should have separate objectives and equipment, as any fans of this character group know how different they each are, especially in signature weapons, from Drizzt's dual-wielding scimitars to Wulfgar's mithril warhammer, Aegis-fang.

Tuque plans to set the game sometime after the events depicted in The Crystal Shard novel, and it is meant to be a standalone story within the lengthy fiction of these characters. Much of the story is aiming to take place in or around the Icewind Dale region – a harsh and unforgiving arctic locale in the northern part of the Forgotten Realms world. Frost giants and other northern monsters are apparent in early footage.

With cooperative play as its big draw, I was happy to hear that Dark Alliance plans to support both local couch co-op as well as online play for up to four players. Tuque hasn't shared any extended gameplay clips yet, so it remains to be seen if the game manages to capture an up-to-date take on the crowded action/RPG field. But it's certainly true that having your buddies seated by your side playing a shared adventure can do a lot to make any game fun, and I hope this revived franchise captures some of the thrill that made the original releases so accessible and replayable.
» Matt Miller

Wasteland 3

Sub-zero survival

The original Wasteland is a beloved post-apocalyptic CRPG that inspired other classics (like Fallout). Back in 2014, developer InXile Entertainment released Wasteland 2, a crowd-funded sequel that followed the series' tradition of tactical combat and deep character progression. With Wasteland 3, InXile is once again returning to this desolate and difficult world, but with an array of new features that make the gameplay more reactive – though not necessarily more forgiving. We asked game director Tim Campbell a few key questions about the ways Wasteland 3 is taking the franchise forward, including frigid environments, cooperative multiplayer, and a customizable vehicle.

Why did you want to explore Colorado as a setting?
A snowy post-apocalyptic setting felt like a novel approach for us to take. The more we fleshed out the idea of changing the setting, the more opportunities for new storytelling and gameplay elements came to us. It wound up feeling like too good of a twist for us to pass it up and go back to arid deserts. A snowy setting has a lot of inherent dangers, and it immediately introduces a sense of vulnerability and isolation … You might not be at risk of dying of thirst anymore, but you're definitely at risk of freezing to death.

Your vehicle seems like a big part of the game. Can you explain how that works?
We treat your vehicle – the Kodiak – as your seventh team member. You haul it out of the snow as a barely functioning junker, and over the course of the game, you get to upgrade and customize its weapons and armor, as well as cosmetics like paint jobs, emblems, and more. The Kodiak is also your mode of transportation, enabling you to drive around and encounter all sorts of dangerous enemies, odd characters, and secret locations – but it's also able to be brought into combat.

What is exciting about Wasteland 3's multiplayer?
We're excited about co-op because Wasteland 3 is inXile's first multiplayer RPG, and we're going to great lengths to not hold anything back. The entire game is fully playable in two-player co-op with all of its reactivity intact. We've gone to great lengths to account for edge-cases where one player kills an NPC or does something unexpected, and it affects the other player in a surprising way. We've also made sure to not gate the two modes, allowing players to switch back and forth between single-player and multiplayer when they want, while continuing their same progression through the game.

How have you reworked the game with the console in mind?
We've spent a ton of time on U.I. … This type of game is notoriously difficult to adapt, as there are a lot of actions that players can take at any given time. Mapping these down to a limited set of controller interactions is a big undertaking, particularly when we're also not willing to compromise on the quality of the PC experience with mouse and keyboard. I love how the game plays on both PC and console platforms, and I think players will be very pleased with all of the improvements we've made. » **Joe Juba**

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One
PC

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player
Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Deep Silver

» **Developer**
InXile
Entertainment

» **Release**
May 19

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Ghost Of Tsushima

The spirit of the samurai

» Platform
PS4

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Sony Interactive Entertainment

» Developer
Sucker Punch Productions

» Release
Summer

Sucker Punch built its name making cutesy mascot platformers like Sly Cooper and splashy superhero epics like Infamous, but its next title is far more grounded, and it is set within real historical events. In 1274, the Mongol Empire invaded the small Japanese island of Tsushima, laying waste to the local population and taking its national treasures. This event was the beginning of a series of brutal and bloody conflicts that spanned generations and ultimately shaped our modern political climate. Amidst this turmoil, Sucker Punch aims to tell a much smaller story about the last remaining samurai on the island, and his battle to protect his people.

Jin is a noble samurai warrior who nearly dies on the beach during the initial Mongolian invasion. He miraculously survives, but is forever changed by the battle. He becomes a man haunted by pain and driven by revenge. In order to save his home, Jin adopts the moniker of The Ghost, becoming a shadowy warrior who fights for his helpless countrymen. However, during this journey, Jin is forced to question his principles and adopt tactics that run counter to the samurai philosophy.

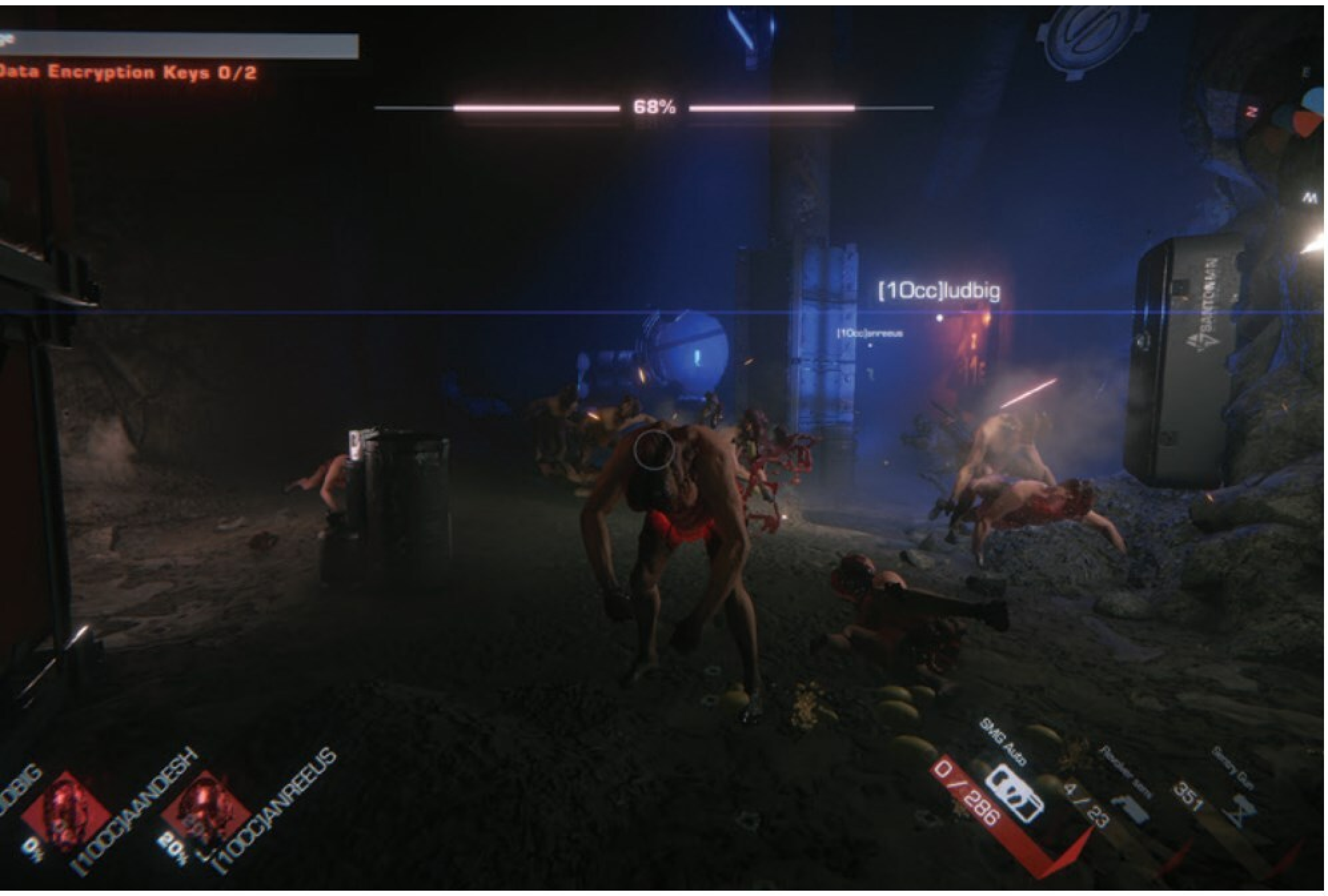
During a trailer, which debuted during *The Game Awards*, we see Jin encounter a group of Mongol warriors who have just finished pillaging a local homestead. The Mongols push a massive cart full of their spoils down the road – a testament to their war crimes. Unfortunately for them, Jin isn't interested in taking prisoners. He wants blood. After a prolonged faceoff, the invaders charge, and Jin drops a smoke bomb. We don't get to see the ensuing battle, but Jin seems to make short work of his attackers, even though it is four to one. At the end of the battle, Jin leaves one attacker alive to deliver a cryptic message, "Tell him I'm coming."

Sucker Punch's revenge story is incredibly compelling, but you don't have to listen to a single line of dialogue to be drawn into Ghosts of Tsushima's jaw-dropping art design. Sucker Punch designed this world in the hopes that, at any point, players can pause the game and take in a stunning vista that is worth framing and putting on a wall. In the trailer, golden leaves glide weightlessly through the air on a gentle breeze. The flames of a watchtower poke through a foggy morning haze. And warriors stoically size each other up from opposite sides of a field of crimson flowers. In the world of Ghost of Tsushima, beauty is around every corner.

Sucker Punch claims that Ghost of Tsushima is its biggest game to date. Up to now, we've only caught glimpses of its colorful open world, but those flashes are so tantalizing that we can't wait to have free rein in this stunning historical reconstruction of Tsushima. Thankfully, we don't have to wait too much longer, as Ghost of Tsushima is currently set for a summer release.
» Ben Reeves

GTFO

Fighting the fear together



With GTFO, Swedish developer 10 Chambers wants to create a world in which fans of *Alien* and Left 4 Dead can take delight. While this isn't a game for solo players, GTFO's tension-filled atmosphere and core mechanics shine brightest when conquering the creepy corridors as a team.

Similar to the aforementioned inspirations, the game acts as a descent into a vivid sci-fi hellscape. Players command four prisoners who do the bidding of the mysterious warden. As players complete levels and delve deeper into the underground structure, the intense difficulty continues to rise.

What makes GTFO interesting, though, is the rundown system. Players have a set amount of time to complete challenges, and once the timer runs out, the warden issues a new "work order" and everyone gets a new set of goals to complete. 10 Chambers has stated each rundown will be different, and the timing will vary with each new drop. In the early access version I played, my team was tasked with everything from finding an administrator's DNA to turning off a power grid. It's a system designed to extend GTFO's shelf life and keep the game fresh.

While the rundown system may attract a new audience, the stark difficulty may be off-putting to solo players. GTFO has been emphasized as a four-player experience, and as such, my solo runs were the stuff of nightmares. With slow reloads, limited supplies, and overwhelming enemy hordes, I died early and often while barely escaping the first area. Combine that with the lack of bots, and it is clear this isn't a game for people looking to play by themselves.

When I finally assembled a squad, GTFO started to click. The same aspects I found frustrating playing solo became enticing with others. In its quieter moments, GTFO pushes the use of melee weapons to silently take out feral foes without alerting others. Not only did these encounters add to the tension of the insidious installation, but quickly became necessary as we needed to save supplies in order reach the moments where stealth wasn't an option.

Though the game emphasizes stealth, certain doors can't be opened without raising alarms. To move forward, teams have to be coordinated and precise, as each reload or turret placement could be the difference between progression or starting from the top. These moments truly had me excited for each new encounter.

While solo players need to look elsewhere, GTFO offers an interesting co-op experience for a group of friends. While it's not quite as action oriented as Left 4 Dead, the game nails its tense atmosphere and forces players to think critically about their next steps. The co-op shooter genre has seen its ups and downs as of late, but GTFO reminds players it can be a spooky good time. GTFO is now in Early Access if you want to see for yourself. » **Alex Stadnik**

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Online Shooter

» **Publisher**
10 Chambers Collective

» **Developer**
10 Chambers Collective

» **Release**
TBA

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DEAD WAR
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GameStop
POWER TO THE PLAYERS
PS4 XBOX ONE REBELLION
MATURE 17+
M
ESRB
Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Language

Life Is Strange 2

Setting a good example

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Dontnod Entertainment **Release** December 3 **Rating** M

Many of the decisions we make in choice-driven games boil down to selfish outcomes; we want to get the best rewards, or spark romance with our favorite love interests. Having that kind of agency is fun, but Life is Strange 2 takes a different approach. It adds dimension by putting another character's needs before your own. Sean and Daniel Diaz are two young brothers on the run, and developer Dontnod tells an emotional tale about the connection between them, all while encouraging players (as Sean) to see choices in terms of what they mean for nine-year-old Daniel.

The bond between the Diaz brothers is the most consistently compelling element of Life is Strange 2. Unlike similar dynamics in other narrative games (like Lee and Clementine in The Walking Dead), Sean isn't just protecting Daniel from danger. You are simultaneously shaping a relationship with him and setting examples for him to follow. This last point is important, because Daniel has mysterious telekinetic powers, and how he uses them – or doesn't – depends largely on Sean's guidance. For instance, if you let him use his ability to kill a dangerous animal instead of scaring it off, that may solve an immediate problem – but you have to wonder what it teaches him about how to use his gift in the future. Can he recognize the boundary between killing an animal and a person? Daniel looks up to Sean, and moments like these effectively keep that fact in the forefront of players' minds. I like how this made me view my choices less in terms of optimizing certain story results, and more in terms of helping Daniel learn right from wrong.

Your interactions in these situations have interesting consequences, because you aren't determining Sean's actions alone. You are also influencing how Daniel might react later. At one point, I told Daniel to be honest with another character about his power, as opposed to keeping it a secret. Because of the guidance I had given him in previous instances, he listened to me and obeyed. But Daniel can also disobey depending on the example you've set, so your decision at any fork in the road isn't a guarantee about how the story will unfold. I wasn't expecting to enjoy this ambiguity, but I did; it makes the behind-the-scenes flowchart of outcomes less apparent, allowing you to focus more on how you think the characters would react.

Life is Strange 2's gameplay is a simple-but-effective combination of walking around, examining objects, and having conversations with the weirdos you meet along the way. The boys' ultimate goal is to travel from Seattle to Mexico, but circumstances force them to live off the grid to avoid detection, which puts them in a variety of questionable situations. Over the course of five episodes, Sean and Daniel cross paths with redneck racists, weed farmers, and zealous cultists. I appreciate how these characters represent a variety of perspectives, but some of the encounters feel contrived. Sean and Daniel meet some people at an outdoor market in Oregon, and just happen to reconnect with them riding the rails in California weeks later? The stereotypical depictions of these side characters also stand in contrast to the care taken with Sean and Daniel, though none of them stay in the spotlight long enough to do significant damage to the larger story.

The writing and performances can feel stilted at times, but even at their worst, Life is Strange 2 retains a core of authenticity that no awkward exchange can erase. Despite imperfect implementation, the game builds a believable rapport between the brothers and made me care about them. I was regularly concerned about their health, whether they got enough to eat, and if they had the freedom to just act like dumb kids sometimes. Forging that connection is crucial for this story to succeed, and the team at Dontnod gets it right.

Episodic games often have gaps of months between installments, but even by those standards, Life is Strange 2 kept fans waiting a long time from one chapter to the next. If you fell off the journey somewhere along the way (or if you were waiting for the tale to conclude, like I was), that is understandable. However, whether you knew it or not, Life is Strange 2 has been quietly weaving a powerful and sincere narrative experience that admirably carries on the series' legacy. » **Joe Juba**

8.5

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
As the eldest of two brothers on the run, your choices and actions shape the personality of the youngest and determine how he uses his telekinetic gift

» **Graphics**
This entry maintains the series' signature visual style, but the faces and animations can't always convey emotions the dialogue seems to require

» **Sound**
A contemplative soundtrack heavy on piano and acoustic guitar sets an appropriate, thoughtful mood

» **Playability**
Straightforward controls make exploration and conversation easy to manage

» **Entertainment**
The Diaz brothers are likable heroes with a believable relationship. Their journey is punctuated by big decisions, surprising consequences, and a satisfying conclusion

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Shenmue III

Pained nostalgia

6

Style 1-Player Action/Adventure **Publisher** Deep Silver **Developer** Ys Net/Neilo **Release** November 19 **Rating** T

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
A sequel 18 years in the making that feels like it was made 18 years ago

» **Graphics**
The world is filled with details and scenic shots. Character models range from realistic to cartoony, but they all mesh somehow

» **Sound**
Music loops too quickly, and some of the voice acting made me cringe

» **Playability**
Conversations are repetitive and often pointless. Combat is clunky and inconsistent. QTEs and minigames are sadly the most polished parts

» **Entertainment**
Exploring small towns is still fun and rewarding until you have to engage in battle and dialogue. Then it falls apart

» **Replay Value**
Moderately low

After a successful Kickstarter campaign backed by almost 70,000 fans who longed to see Ryo Hazuki's journey continue, developers Ys Net and Neilo created a new Shenmue game – one that would feel right at home on the Dreamcast. Shenmue III provides a deep well of nostalgia for fans returning to the series, but also feels dated and desperately needs to evolve in key areas. It is a game that time forgot, a new experience that stubbornly clings to its retro roots and ignores most innovations that shaped interactive entertainment for the last 18 years.

Picking up exactly where the last chapter left off, we see young Ryo and his new friend Shenhua Ling emerge from a cave to continue tracking Lan Di, the man who killed Ryo's father. This opening moment flashes fool's gold in front of players, with a scenic walk backed by stunning visuals. You see highly detailed textures, lushly populated storefronts, and lighting that makes Bailu Village look like one of the most tranquil places on the globe. The world looks great, but is the only part of the game that is truly modern. The gameplay that follows screams of the early '00s and can be downright awful – not just from how old it feels, but also how poorly conceived it is.

While I had some fun ignoring Ryo's bid for revenge to dabble in a nice selection of side activities (such as catching ducks or collecting capsule toys), the critical path suffers from monotony. This is primarily due to an overreliance on talking to civilians to uncover the path forward. Shenmue III struggles with how it implements conversations, and yet that's what you do most of the time. The dialogue is stilted, lines are repeated, and some responses don't sync up with the question at all. Ryo's line of questioning also makes him sound like the world's worst detective. "I'm looking for some thugs. Have you seen them?" "Do you know where I can learn kung fu?" Get used to hearing him ask about these things for hours on end.

When Ryo isn't engaging in these maddening exchanges, he's training to improve his skills – not just to take on Lan Di, but those pesky thugs and plenty of other threats. He gains experience and levels up by sparring against other opponents and by practicing on training dummies. Despite the exercises being incredibly boring – like squatting in place for a minute – the skills you collect provide a nice pursuit of power. If you take the time to train extensively, you can basically break the game balance and become a monster of a combatant, which I found to be worthy of my time in light of the suspect combat system.

Battles are more fluid than in Shenmue 1 and 2, allowing you to initiate special attacks with a click of a button, but don't expect every hit to land – even if you punch someone square in the face. All too often, I would knock an opponent down, circle around to get behind them, and then perform another devastating blow that, despite hitting the target spot on, didn't do any damage or stagger them at all. It's like I didn't even deliver it. These inconsistencies can be infuriating, especially since you may need to stop retrying a battle to buy more food to restore your health, which could also mean you need to take on a job or be forced to gamble to have the requisite funds.

Some of the mission designs are clearly used to halt player progress, such as being forced to earn enough to buy a bottle of wine or a book. Earning this money sometimes falls onto dumb luck at the casino or completing mundane jobs over and over again.

Shenmue III is often frustrating, but I still enjoyed my time in Bailu and the other locations Ryo eventually visits. The freedom to explore and do what you want still holds plenty of fun, and the world is charming; it has its own vibe, flair, and pacing. I just didn't like it when Ryo would talk or fight, which just happen to be what Shenmue III's critical path is mostly about. It also has plenty of QTE moments, which are oddly the most polished and fair part of this experience. In these moments, Ryo skillfully ducks and weaves out of the way of punches and obstacles, and should you happen to miss a button press, you immediately get another shot. They're fun to watch and don't punish you.

I also enjoyed the journey that Ryo and Shenhua took, even though little progress was made in the overall story. Fans knew this going in, however, as director Yu Suzuki stated Shenmue III only gets us through roughly 40 percent of Ryo's tale. We're not even halfway through this epic idea yet. Despite having many issues with Shenmue III, I'm glad I returned to this world. It scratched an itch I didn't know I had, and periodically showed me why it was an important game back in the day. But it mostly reminded me of why a third entry didn't release for almost two decades. » **Andrew Reiner**

Wattam

A charming little storybook

Style 1 or 2-Player Action **Publisher** Annapurna Interactive **Developer** Funomena **Release** December 17 **Rating** E10+

Designer Keita Takahashi exploded our consciousness in the PlayStation 2 era with the release of Katamari Damacy. He may not be the most prolific creator out there, but his creations are memorable for both their simple aesthetics and strange, almost alien gameplay conceits. Is rolling a giant, sticky ball around enjoyable? Sure! And even if I didn't ultimately understand the point of Katamary Damacy's follow up, Noby Noby Boy, stretching my character around its colorful world was fun for a while. Wattam offers more structure than some of his more out-there experiments while still encouraging players to explore and poke around to see what they can discover.

We start off by meeting the Mayor, a green cube with a mustache and bowler hat. He's alone in the world following a cataclysmic event, but he soon discovers that all is not lost. By walking around a floating platform and interacting with objects, he makes friends with anthropomorphized creations like rocks, flowers, and toilets. You can swap between any of these new friends at will, though aside from the kick you might get from being able to explore as a golden turd, mouth, acorn, or myriad other characters, there are few reasons to do so.

Mayor has a neat trick at his disposal: By holding down a button, he lifts his hat, exposing an explosive present beneath. Other characters really, really enjoy being blown into the air, and nobody gets hurt from these detonations. Wattam feels like you're engaging with an interactive storybook, and explosions are a frequent event in the early moments. Those give way to moments that fully dive into the game's more surreal impulses.

The simple interactions that trigger these crazy sequences may not be particularly engaging – most of them kick off by asking a newly introduced character "What's wrong?" – but moments like enlisting a balloon to help retrieve a phone's handset from the sun kept me smiling through much of the game. Funomena takes what is already a pretty memorable setup and adds even more silly layers, such as the fact that the balloon is afraid of heights, and that his eventual journey upward is accompanied by an uncharacteristically energetic rock soundtrack. There are loads of moments throughout Wattam's brief duration that pile on similarly strange elements, and most of them are delightful.

Wattam is at its best when it embraces its toy-like qualities. There are times where it appears to be trying to be more of a traditional game, which is where it falters. Even though your actions are generally limited to clasping hands with your friends, climbing objects (including your friends), and swapping control between multiple characters, there's a lack of precision that accompanies it all. It's easy to overlook it when you're simply exploring the world and experimenting within its toybox, but a regrettable boss encounter highlights that Wattam's controls aren't up to more demanding tasks. You can't die or fail, but it's tedious and out of place. That fight and an overlong item-fetching sequence near the end are lows in what's otherwise a simple and joyous time.

The charming visuals and messages of compassion and cooperation make Wattam a great game to play with younger members of the family, either in co-op or pass-the-controller sessions. Even if it doesn't inspire any meaningful conversations about the importance of friendship – which it absolutely could – there's a good chance that you'll find plenty of silly fun together. » **Jeff Cork**

7.25

PS4 • PC

» **Concept**
Restore the world from the edge of oblivion through the power of friendship, compassion, and poop

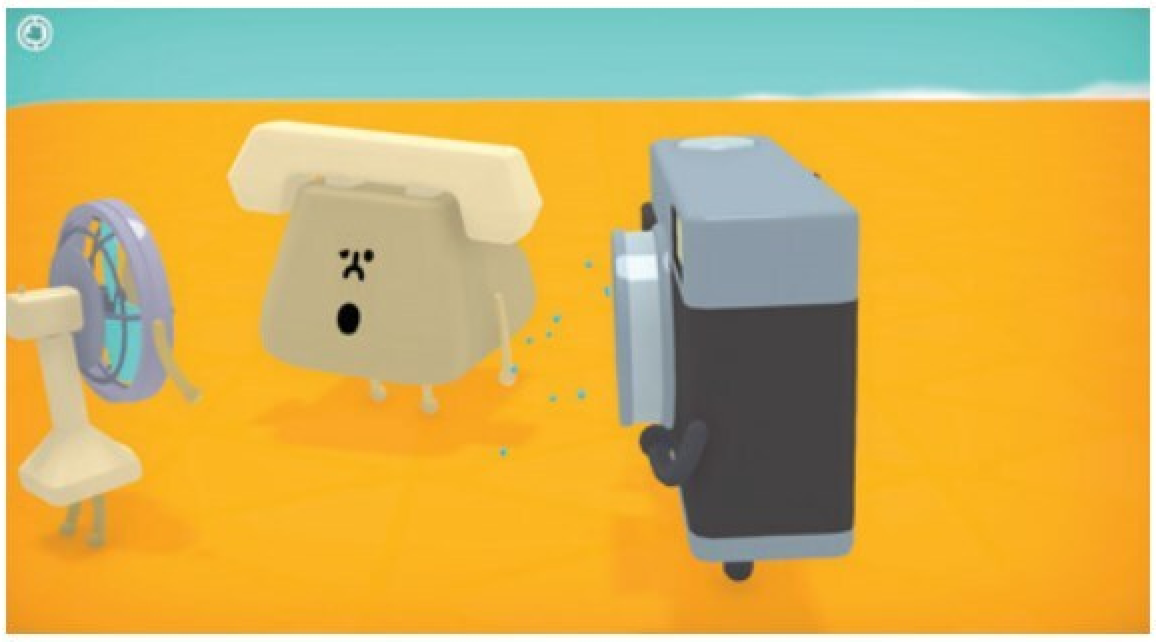
» **Graphics**
Visuals are crisp and bright, with an almost storybook-like quality. Their simplicity makes the odd performance stutters a little baffling

» **Sound**
Jazzy orchestral music shifts and transforms as you swap between characters and move between areas. It's a treat for your ears

» **Playability**
It's easy to accidentally swap between characters, and selecting specific ones can be tricky. A poorly implemented boss encounter highlights the overall lack of precision

» **Entertainment**
Keita Takahashi delivers another singular title that's as much an interactive art piece as it is a game

» **Replay Value**
Moderately low



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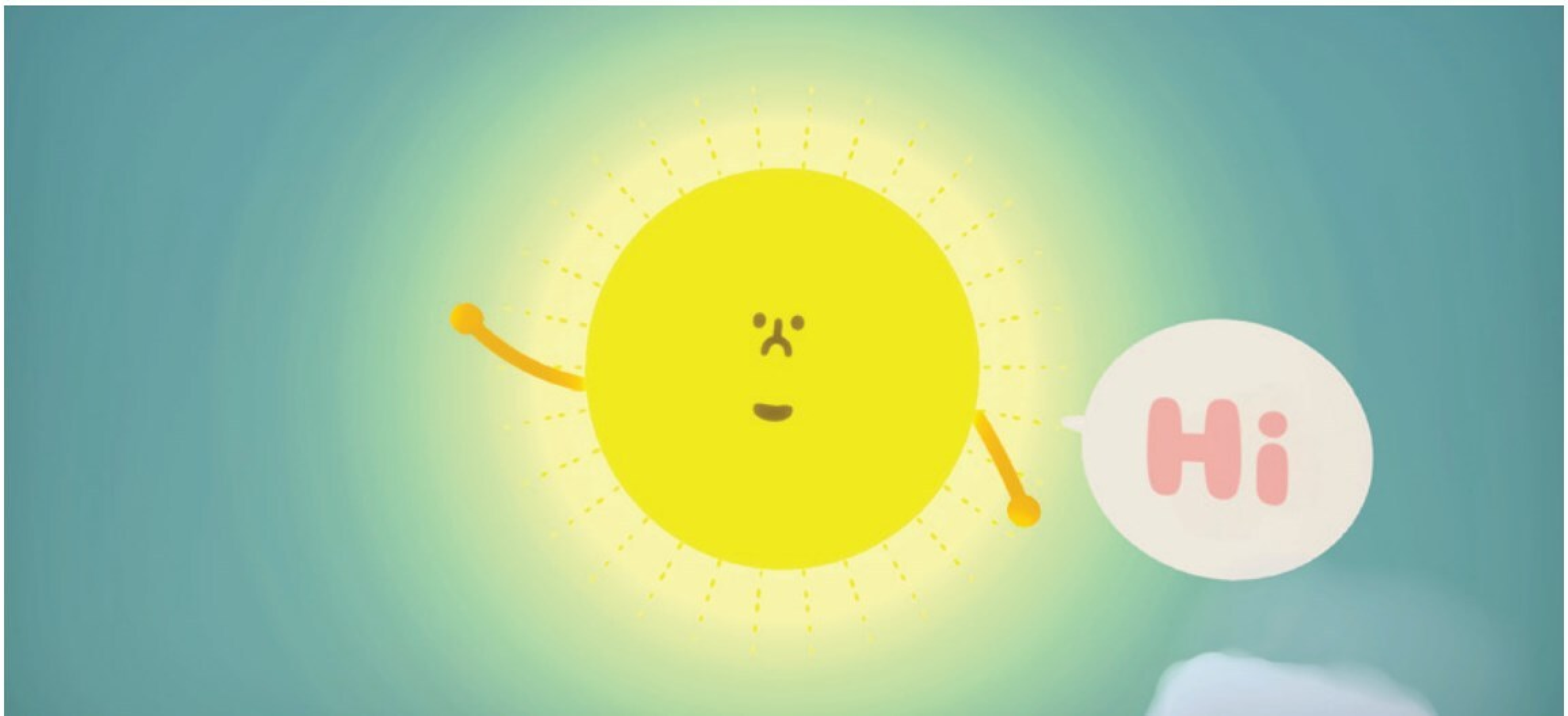
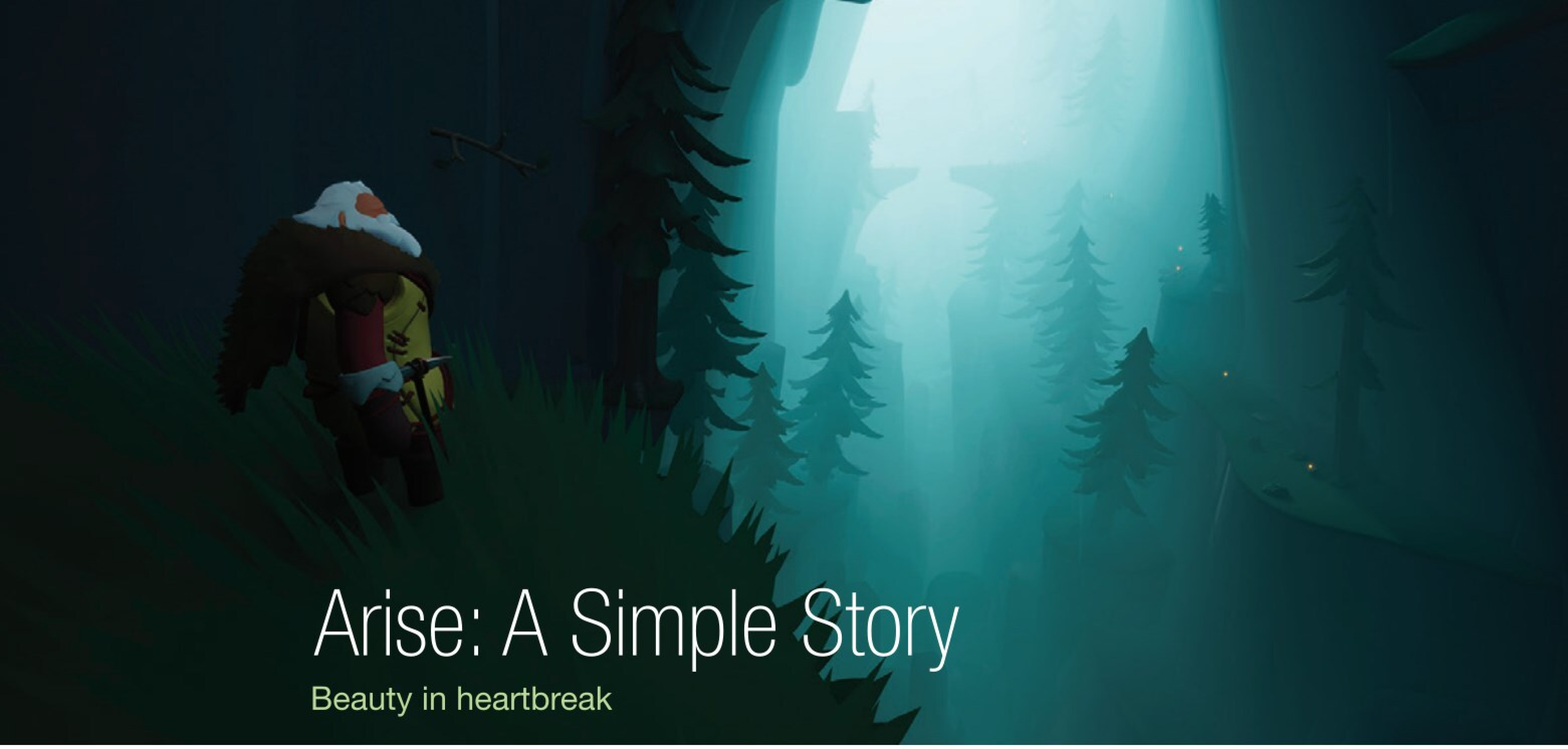




Arise: A Simple Story

Beauty in heartbreak

8.75

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Trace the defining moments of a man's life as he walks the allegorical path between life and death

» Graphics
Exaggerated and surreal imagery captures how memory endures through specific flashbulb images

» Sound
A moving classical score accentuates the wordless storytelling and lends emotional resonance

» Playability
Navigation is the biggest stumbling block in an otherwise artistic tour de force; the frustrating platforming and traversal subtract from the experience

» Entertainment
Even with occasionally questionable jumping sequences, this emotionally fraught journey is a potent statement on the nature of love, memory, and loss

» Replay Value
Moderate

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Techland **Developer** Piccolo Studio **Release** December 3 **Rating** E

Arise: A Simple Story is an emotionally charged, heartbreaking, and thoughtful game. Across 10 unique levels, players chart the critical moments of a man's life as he makes the transition between life and death. You explore far-ranging themes like romance, depression, grief, family, and how they all tie together. Clumsy, sometimes-frustrating platforming mars the gameplay, but as a testament to the strength of the surrounding experience, those problems don't hold me back from a fervent recommendation. The game's unusual title is simultaneously an aphorism and a subtle sarcasm; even the most uncomplicated life is fraught with emotional complexity, and what seems simple on the surface is anything but when examined from within.

As an old man, you wake from the stillness of your funeral pyre into limbo and must navigate a series of memories that shaped the life you lived. Each memory manifests as a visually distinct landscape inspired by a specific moment, like the first kiss with your partner, or the building of a crib ahead of a child's birth. The visual design of each level is a particular strength, transforming concepts into a sort of visual language. In a childhood memory, everything looks bigger than it should. When confronting depression, the old man is chased by a crowd of shadowy selves, threatening to pull him down.

As you explore these memories, the right analog stick acts as a lever that fasts forwards and rewinds time around these moments of consequence. In practice, that means you might rewind time so you can jump on the back of a lily pad, and then float down the river as it flits through the path of your recollection. The time mechanic is an interesting metaphor for the way we recall important junctures, and the times that precede and follow them, with a clarity that defies easy description. It's also a fun way to engender some light puzzle-solving and exploration.

Through the confluence of a particularly striking orchestral score, collectible art images that add definition to the memories, and a deliberate approach to level design, Arise keeps its ambitions small and focused. Because of that, it's easy to identify with the universality of its emotional ups and downs. The highs are joyful, the lows are crushing, all in ways that feel genuinely wrenching.

I have nothing but praise for the narrative and thematic vibrancy, so it's especially unfortunate that some of the jumping and other traversal moments are handled poorly. Nothing breaks the immersion of a powerful sequence like tumbling off a cliffside because of a misjudged platforming attempt. With the absence of a manual camera rotation stacked on top of imprecise controls, I was pulled out of the flow more than once, which is a real shame. It's not a constant problem, but it's one that crops up enough to hurt an otherwise stirring narrative.

Even with some stumbles, Arise is a game that knows what it wants to communicate, and does so with delicacy and sensitivity. I've found individual scenes coming back to mind frequently since I completed the game, most notably the moving sequence that closes the game. Accept the dilemma of a few bad jumping sequences, and push toward the emotional core, as this simple story has a lot of wisdom to share. » **Matt Miller**

Mosaic

The absurdity of life

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Simulation **Publisher** Raw Fury **Developer** Krillbite Studio **Release** December 5 **Rating** T

Mosaic gives meaning to the meaningless; it's existential nihilism in digital form. The fact that you actively play through the silent protagonist's life of crushing drudgery and not just passively experience it is important. Mosaic is nihilistic not simply because the protagonist's life is a listless mill of work and sleep, but because it has no inherent meaning other than the one you give it by direct action and the creation of interludes that punctuate the grind.

You play through a loop of waking up, going to work, performing your duties, and then going home. You do this by simply walking along corridors and interacting with objects when prompted onscreen. Your actions and options within this cycle are limited to simple things like brushing your teeth and checking the messages on your phone, reinforcing the rigidity and absurd futility of the situation. One of my favorite examples of this is when a prospective date with a co-worker falls through. This cannot be prevented, only accepted in its delicious emptiness.

Mosaic isn't a game only of dead ends, however. While traveling through your daily routine, you might come across a reverie in the form of looking out of a window and stealing some sunshine, listening to a street musician, or even controlling a butterfly. During these moments the game transforms. Color warms the screen, and your senses immediately liven. Of course, this is only possible because the game does a good job first encasing you in drab passivity before letting you break free. While these aren't necessarily profound moments, I could still feel them.

Mosaic also succeeds because it uses different gameplay perspectives to represent the character's isolated, hollow existence. You may become a miniature version of yourself or be forced to move the camera to navigate out of a short maze. These sequences surprised me as I went about my day, and they are also appropriately disorienting without throwing players into frustrating gameplay confusion. Instead, it feels like a person confronting the realization that they don't know or understand how their life became this depressing.

Even supposedly mundane tasks like the work you perform at your job are fun in and of themselves, despite being cast in the world as boring and unfulfilling. Your job is to apply resources on a hex grid in order to progress via the most efficient route possible to meet goals. This minigame minimally evolves through transporting resources faster and by introducing enemies of inefficiency that you have to quarantine. I look forward to it in Mosaic because it taps that basic task completion/goal achievement area of my gamer lizard brain. Similarly, I like playing Blip Blop, the simple clicker game on my character's mobile phone, even though it is itself a commentary on our inherent attraction to playing games just because leveling up feels good, no matter how nakedly it's achieved. In fact, I wish Mosaic brought me deeper down its gameplay and in-world rabbit holes (it's not a long title) such as my job's minigame and the dating apps of its dead-end world.

Some games are power fantasies that revel in the thrilling exercise of control. Mosaic doesn't render you powerless, but by enveloping you in the futility of the protagonist and making you understand it, the game heightens the effect and meaning of the power you do have. Life may indeed be meaningless, but Mosaic is here for your sheer enjoyment.

» **Matthew Kato**

8.75

PC • iOS

» **Concept**
Live through the drudgery of modern life and dream of an escape

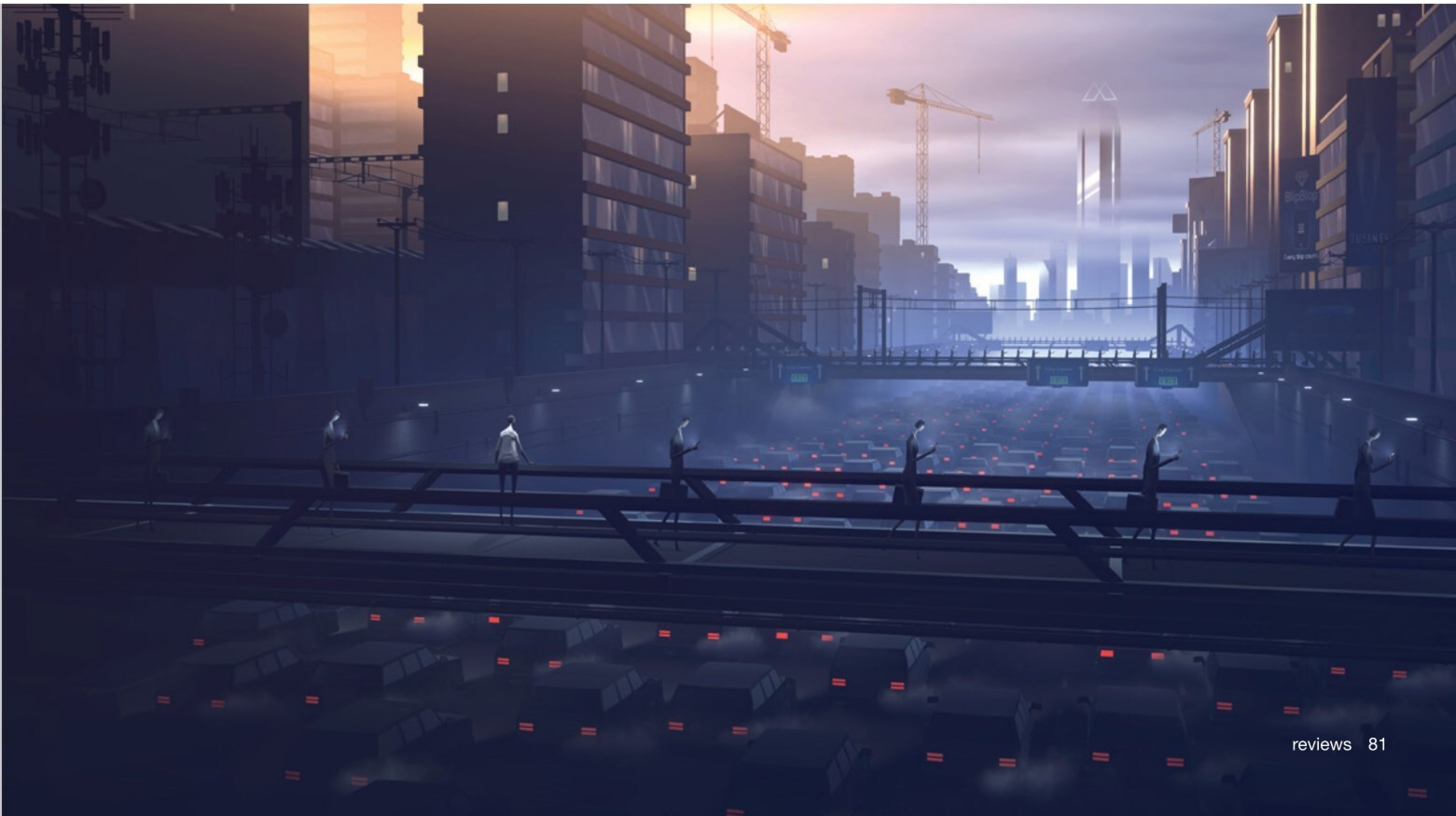
» **Graphics**
The character models and uses of color effectively convey the mood and gameplay

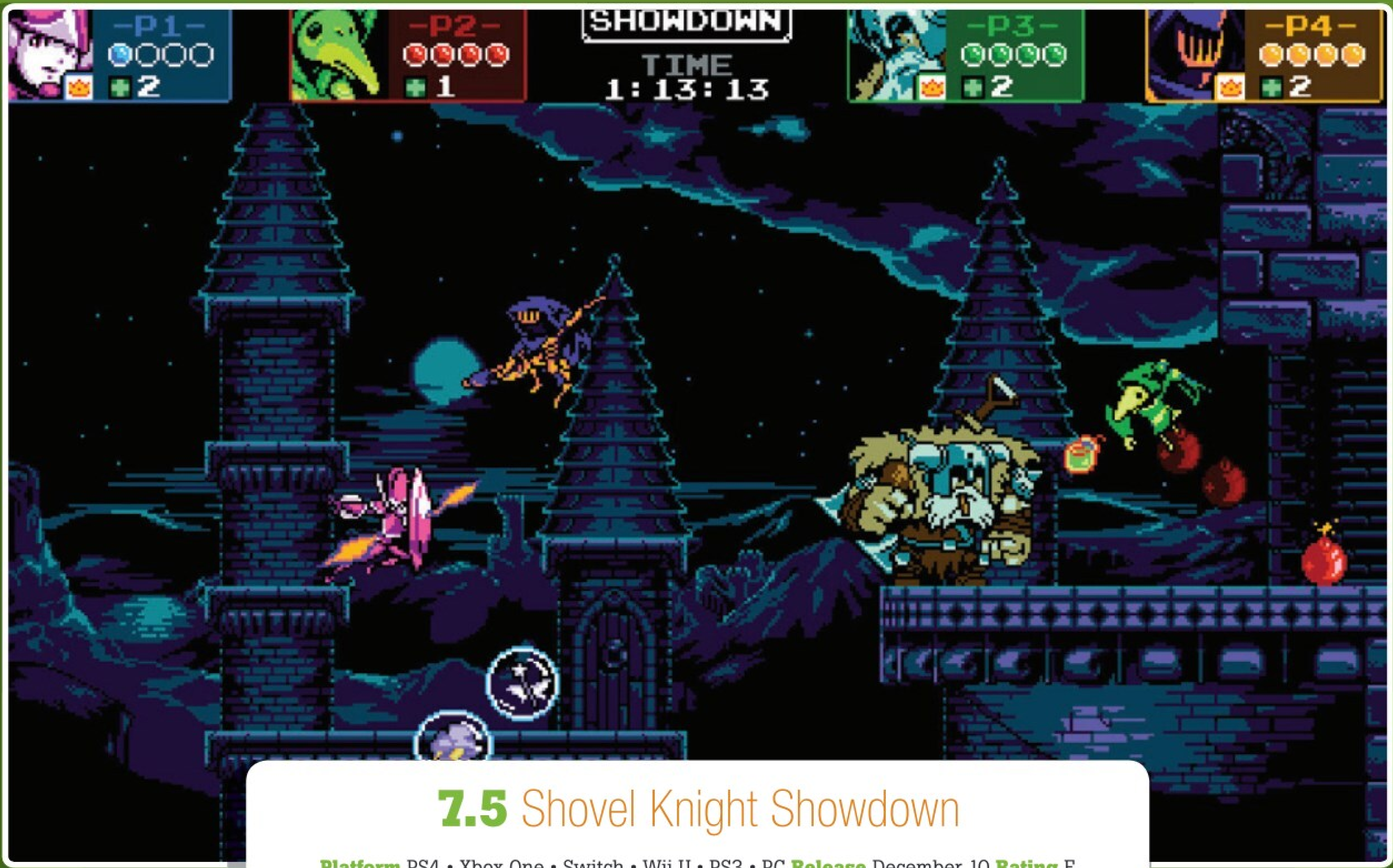
» **Sound**
The punctuations and eddies of music (electronic and jazz) nicely flow at the right place and time

» **Playability**
At times there are moments when you're not sure what to do, but the game's simple controls don't steer you wrong

» **Entertainment**
From both philosophical and pure gameplay perspectives, I loved playing Mosaic

» **Replay Value**
Moderately Low





7.5 Shovel Knight Showdown

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • Wii U • PS3 • PC **Release** December 10 **Rating** E

Shovel Knight Showdown is great for short sessions with friends, or a couple playthroughs of the story mode, but simple movesets and repetition limit the enjoyment. You can dig into some good Shovel Knight fun here, but don't expect to strike gold. – Brian Shea

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F1 2019	8.75	Sep-19
FIFA 20	7.5	Dec-19
Final Fantasy XIV: Shadowbringers	9	Oct-19
Gears 5	8.5	Nov-19
Ghost Recon Breakpoint	6	Dec-19
GreedFall	7.25	Nov-19
Grid	7	Dec-19
Indivisible	7	Dec-19
Ion Fury	9	Oct-19
John Wick Hex	8	Dec-19
Knights and Bikes	8	Nov-19
Lonely Mountains: Downhill	8.75	Jan-20
Magic: The Gathering Arena	8.75	Dec-19
NASCAR Heat 4	7	Nov-19
NBA 2K20	8.5	Nov-19
Need for Speed Heat	8	Jan-20
Neo Cab	8	Dec-19
Outer Worlds, The	9.25	Dec-19
Planet Zoo	7	Jan-20
Plants vs. Zombies: Battle for Neighborville	7.75	Jan-20
Remnant: From the Ashes	8.5	Oct-19
River City Girls	7	Nov-19
Sojourn, The	6.5	Dec-19
Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order	8.75	Jan-20
Surge 2, The	8.5	Dec-19
Telling Lies	9	Oct-19
Untitled Goose Game	7.5	Dec-19
Wolfenstein: Youngblood	8.5	Sep-19
World of Warcraft Classic	9	Nov-19
Wreckfest	8.5	Nov-19
Yooka-Laylee and the Impossible Lair	8.5	Dec-19

iOS

Dr. Mario World	8.75	Sep-19
Neo Cab	8	Dec-19
Sayonara Wild Hearts	7	Dec-19
Sky: Children of the Light	8.5	Sep-19

6.5 Darksiders Genesis

Platform Stadia • PC **Release** December 5 **Rating** M

Since Darksiders' inception, fans have imagined what it might be like to team up as the different horsemen. Darksiders Genesis finally offers a co-op experience, but its offbeat design and forgettable story don't deliver on the fantasy. – Ben Reeves

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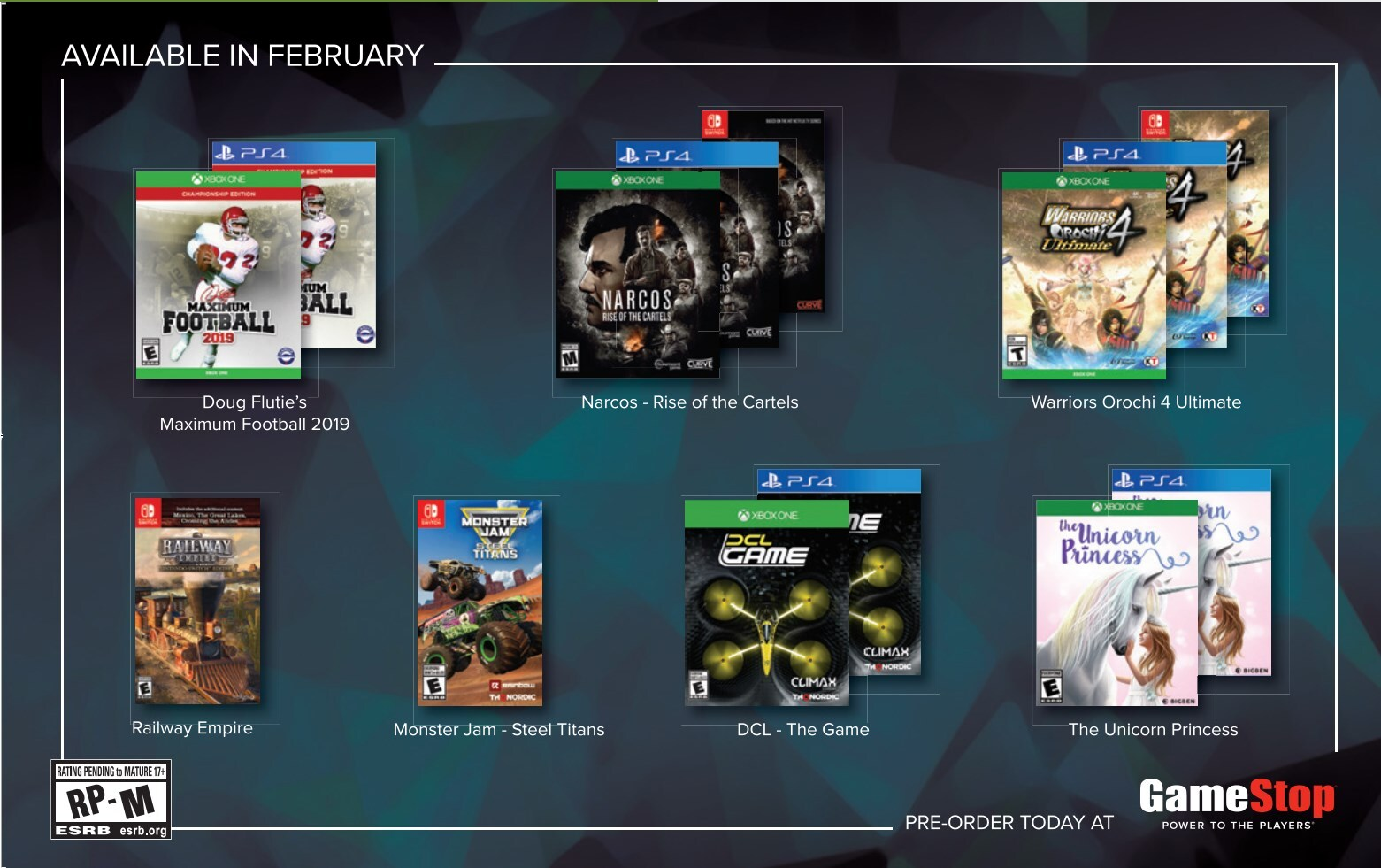

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Doug Flutie's Maximum Football 2019

Narcos - Rise of the Cartels

Warriors Orochi 4 Ultimate

Railway Empire

Monster Jam - Steel Titans

DCL - The Game

The Unicorn Princess

RATING PENDING to MATURE 17+
RP-M
ESRB esrb.org

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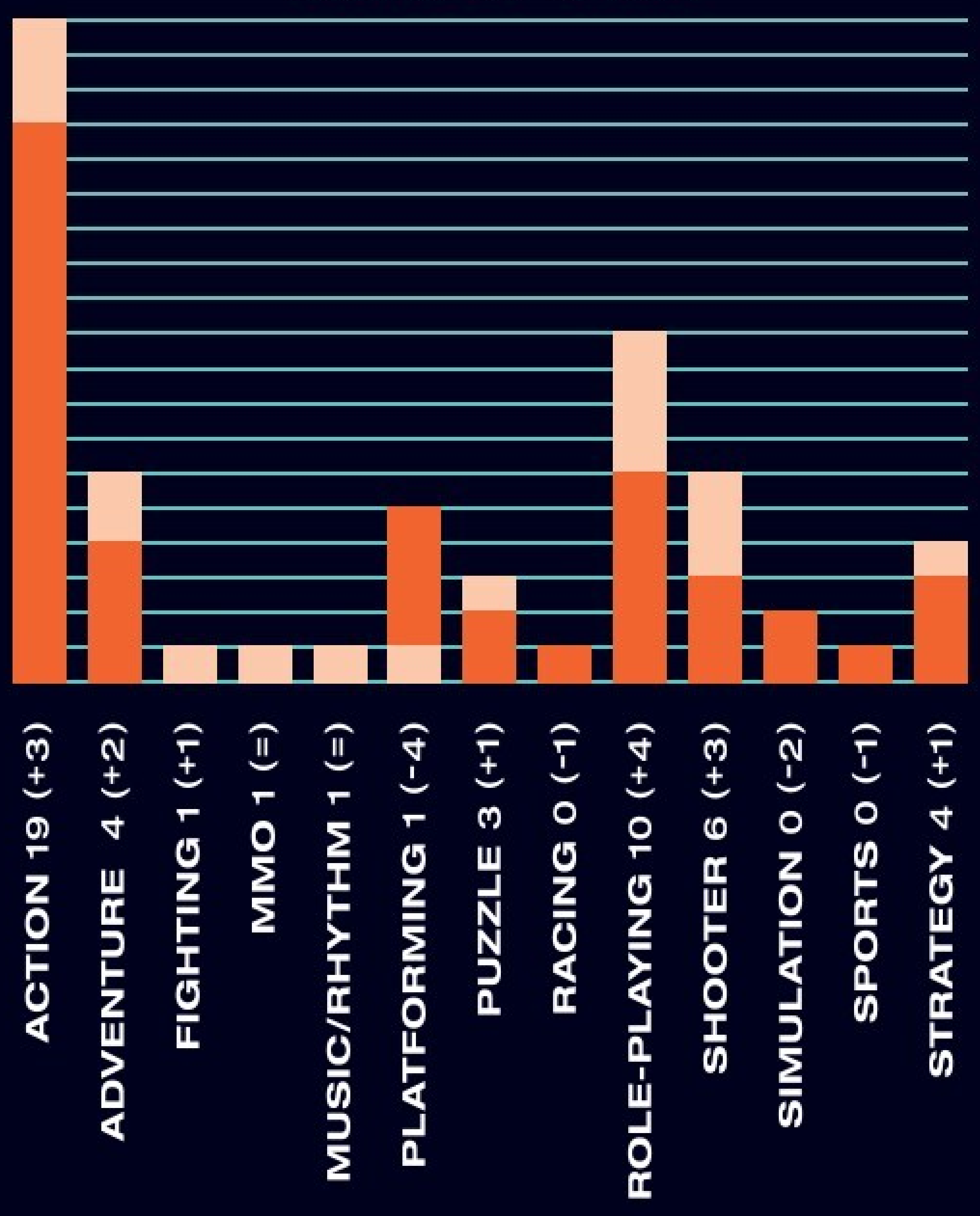
Top 50

BY THE NUMBERS

Every year, we try to find the best games to highlight in our Top 50. This annual snapshot lets you see what's trending from a gameplay standpoint, but we also break down various stats according to data points like publisher, platform exclusives, and more. Here are the totals for our 2019 entries, compared to our Top 50 Games of 2018.

THIS YEAR (LAST YEAR)

TOTALS BY GENRE



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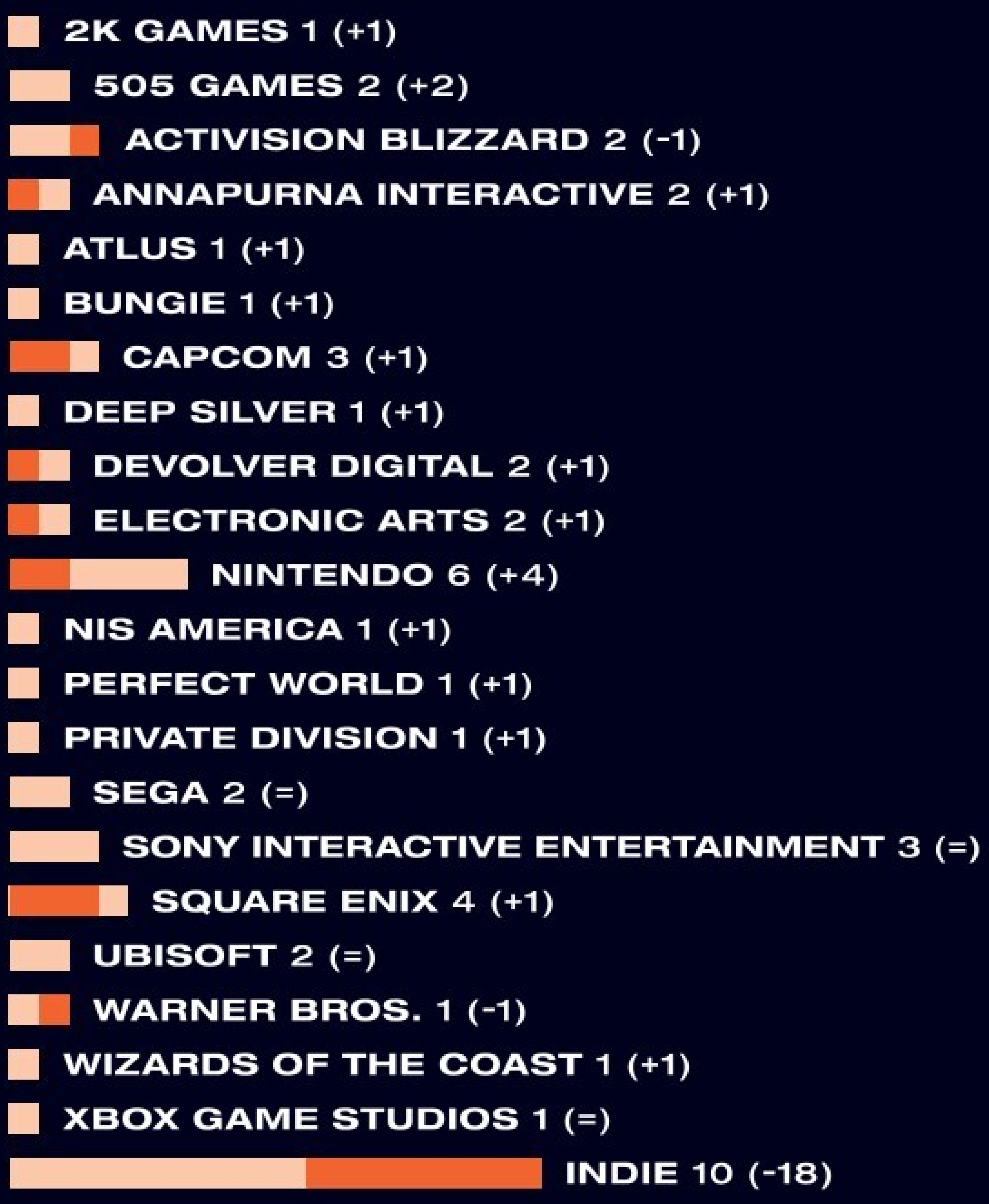

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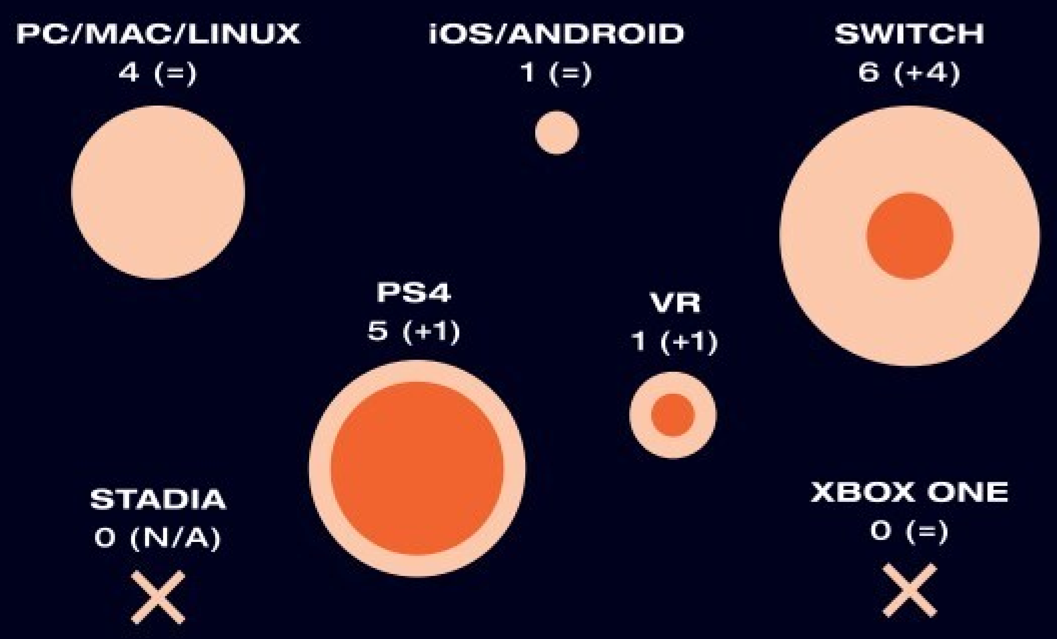
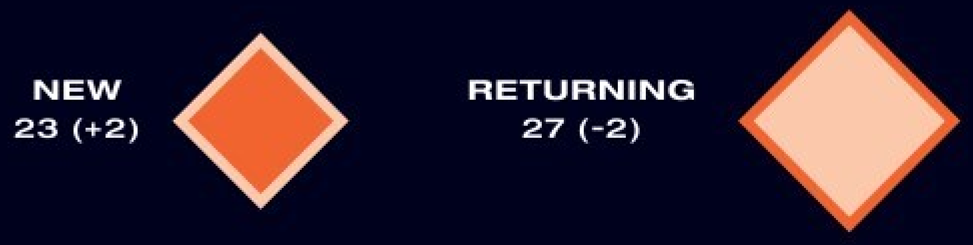


SERIES ON THE LIST



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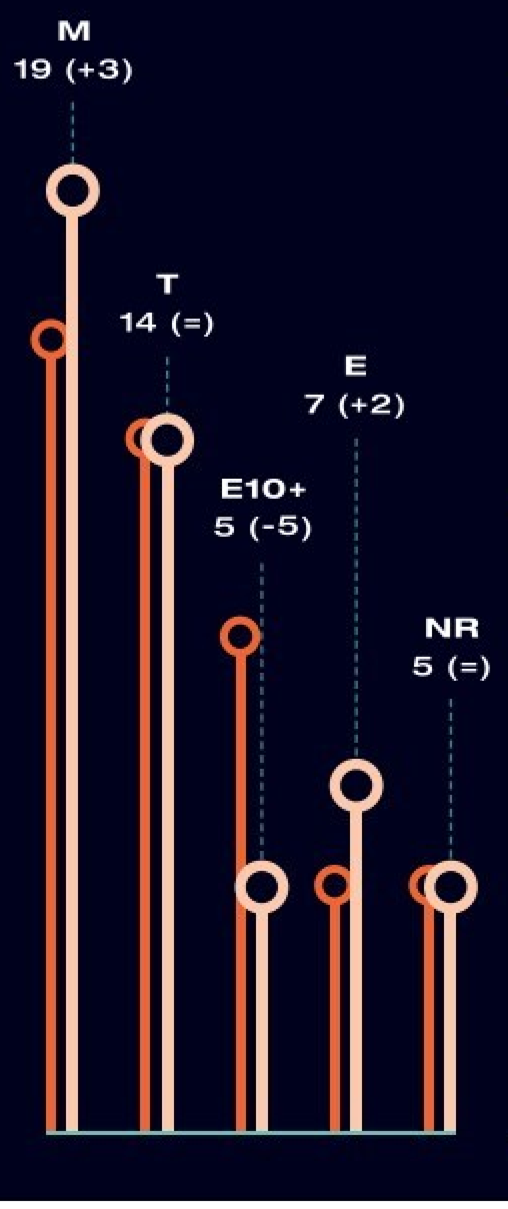

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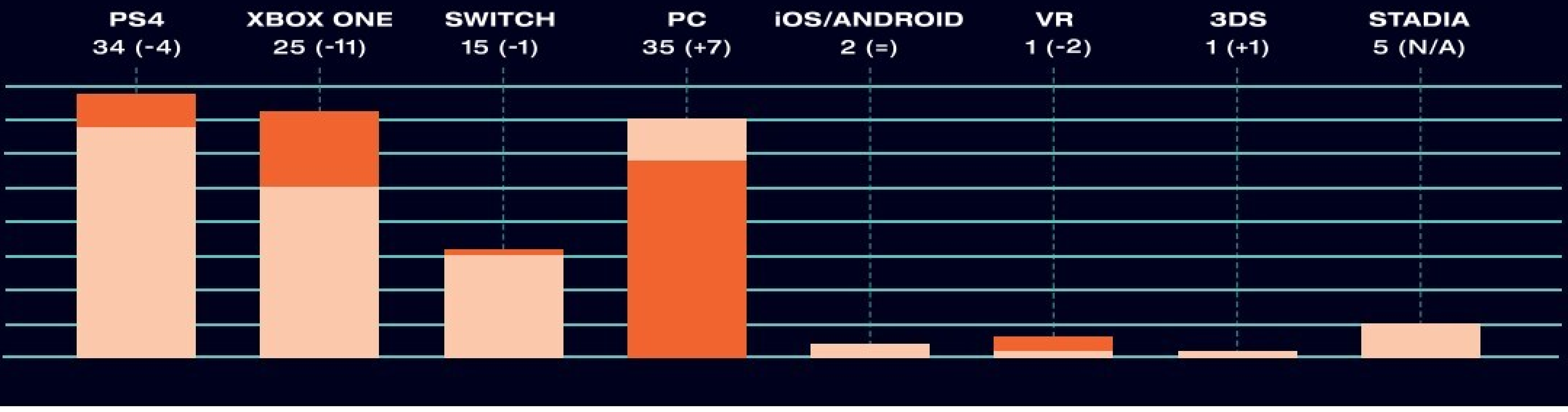

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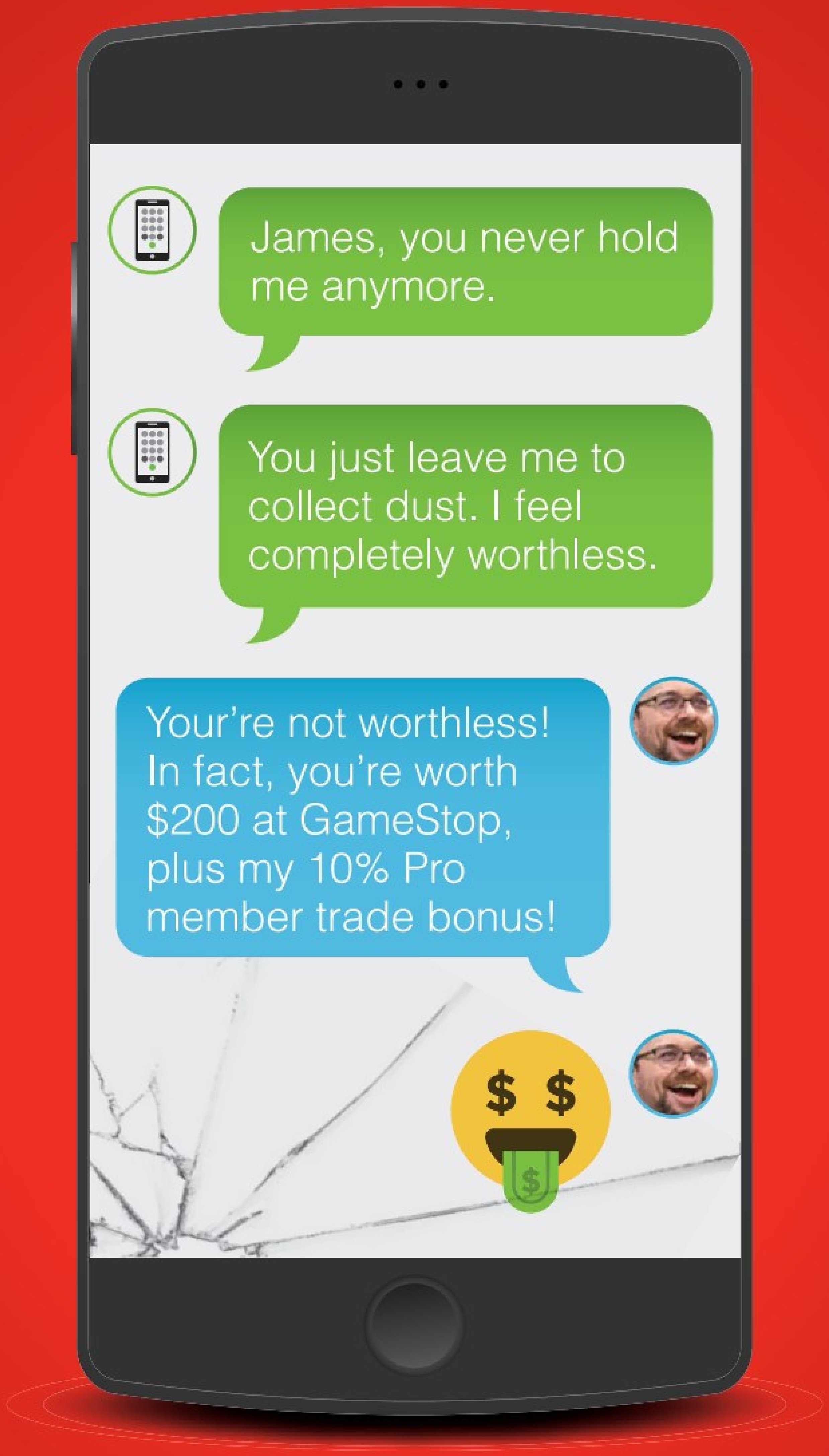

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